

A
MARQUESS
TO CALL HER
OWN
TIFFANY BATON

A Marquess to Call Her Own

A Historical Regency Romance

Tiffany Baton



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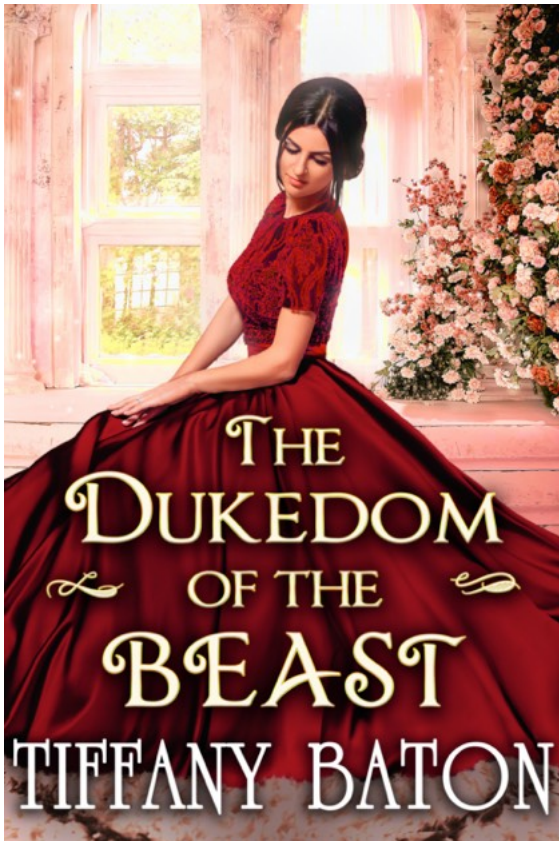
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A Sweet Gift From Me to You

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She is the only wish his soul would make...

Miss Alicia Sempill is left to fend for herself. With no family of her own, and with her last employment ending in scandal, she must find employment soon, even if it means working for a man that she has only heard horrible rumors about.

James Arvill, the Marquess of Warwick, has had to live with the Ton's vicious gossip for years now. Rumored to have killed his own father to inherit his title, he is left raising his two mischievous siblings all by himself. So, when a bright-eyed governess enters his doorstep, he reluctantly hires her.

As much as the two try to keep their distance from each other, however, they are drawn together, unknowingly walking right into the wolf's den. For the lovesick, the betrayed, and the jealous all smell alike...

Chapter One

A pale face stared back through the mirror, eyes dark and lips pursed into a frown. It was such an unfamiliar expression that the woman hardly recognized herself, save for those familiar green eyes staring back at her. When Alicia blinked, so did her reflection, and the spell shattered as she turned away.

"You'll do fine," Rachel said, perching on the end of the bed. She'd been there the entire day, murmuring reassurances into Alicia's ear the whole time. Even Rachel's calm nature didn't actually help but only worsened the nerves rolling in Alicia's stomach.

"I need this job," Alicia said softly, "If I don't find something soon, I'll lose the house; then where will I go? It isn't as if I have any family that can help." Hands curling into fists, Alicia forced herself to take a deep, drawn-out breath. It helped for as long as it took to catch herself in the mirror again. She was a mess. Nobody was going to hire her.

Rachel uttered a sympathetic sigh and reached out to squeeze Alicia's hand. Rachel's skin was always so soft. She used only the best lotions and moisturizers available. For a woman with not much more money than Alicia herself, she had expensive taste. Now, though, the softness of her skin sent a jolt of reassurance through Alicia. "Like I said," she repeated, "you'll do fine. This is the one; I can feel it."

"And how would you know?"

A shrug, an easy smile. "I don't, but something tells me that this is going to be a good day."

They had been friends for years; ever since Rachel moved into the house across the street and caught Alicia tumbling out of a tree at just eleven years old. Now they were both twenty-three, but little had changed. Alicia was still the worrier who somehow always got herself into trouble. Rachel was still the one to always offer reassurances.

"Do you think I look all right?" Alicia murmured, gesturing to her dark navy dress. It was drab and boring, but professional at least. Without a choice of clothing, it was the best she had managed to pull together. "I can wear a shawl since it's so gray outside - or should I take a proper coat? I have that blue pelisse Papa bought me for my twentieth birthday-" Grinding to a halt, Alicia took in a steady breath.

Expression twisting in sympathy, Rachel only sighed. "You're overthinking. The marquess won't care what you're wearing so long as you're competent at the job. Which you are." Before Alicia could interject, she added, "I know you've never been a governess before, but you've got the spirit and the determination, and you're good with children. That's all you need."

Alicia wasn't convinced. Nothing that Rachel said was enough to do more than momentarily distract her from her darker thoughts. Alicia reached across her old vanity table for her hairpins, hoping that she could at least make her hair look nice to distract from her pale, nervous face. She bundled up reddish-brown hair and piled it into an elegant bun, which was about the only hairstyle she could competently do.

Rachel watched quietly the entire time, a kind smile on her features. "See? There's no need to worry. You have this under control."

Alicia wished she could believe that. Yet worse than her inferiority, worse than the concern of losing this job, was a second worry. "If I do get this governess position, I won't complain, how could I? But... have you heard the rumors?"

Brows furrowed, Rachel shifted forward on the bed until her legs dangled off the edge. Now she was intrigued; Alicia recognized that impatient look anywhere. "Rumors? Of course, I have - my sister was talking about it just last week."

"Right." Chewing on her lip was such a terrible habit, and yet Alicia found herself doing it anyway. By the time she reached the marquess' manor, they'd be chewed to shreds. She hadn't even put on her shoes or finished her hair when she collapsed onto the bed with a dull oof. "Do you really think he did it? Killed his own father?"

"I don't know," Rachel replied, "but other people believe it."

As far as Alicia was concerned, rumors were just that; but they usually came from some kind of truth. She didn't want to work for a killer, no matter how desperately she needed the money. It was probably untrue, gossip spread by misunderstanding or even malice... but Alicia couldn't shake the thought from her mind.

"Alicia," Rachel chided, placing a soft hand on her shoulder, "you're doing that thing again; where you overthink and spiral into a panic."

"I'm not panicking," came her automatic response, only for her voice to pitch and waver. Okay, perhaps a little bit, then.

"Finish getting ready and come and eat something. I'll make us breakfast, okay?"

Although Alicia had no appetite, her stomach still grumbled in response at the prospect of a meal. Scowling at the floor, Alicia reluctantly agreed. "All right, but only something small. And coffee, please. I need to be awake."

Laughter spilled from Rachel's lips as she stood to leave, nodding in agreement. "Coffee it is, then. I'll see you in a few minutes." She threw open the bedroom door and wandered into the narrow hall, and then she was gone.

Now that she was alone, Alicia took the time to steady her breathing. She hadn't been this nervous for any other interview, and she'd had plenty. Except, she hadn't been so desperate before, and she hadn't had to deal with the idea of working for a possible murderer. Even as she tried to disregard the thought, it lingered.

The marquess has two young siblings to think of. He wouldn't kill his own father. What a ridiculous thought! She reached for the last pin and shoved it into her hair with enough force that it scraped along her forehead, leaving a little trail of dull pain in its wake, and thoughts of the Marquess of Warwick momentarily left her mind.

Downstairs, Rachel was already making coffee, the strong scent wafting through the house.

They finished breakfast quickly, although Alicia only took two more bites before admitting defeat. If she ate too much, she only ran the risk of feeling ill before her interview, and she didn't want to imagine

all of the things that could go wrong with that. Already, those persistent nerves were crawling up her throat.

"I could walk you to the manor, if you like?" Rachel suggested as she put the dishes into the sink. She wasn't dressed for the weather, having arrived only in a dress and no shawl, but the cold had never bothered her much.

Even so, Alicia shook her head. "Thank you, but I think I had better go alone. What time is it?"

Rachel peered into the living room through the adjoining door and announced, "Quarter past ten."

Alicia paled. Her blood ran cold. No, that wasn't right... when she had looked during breakfast, it had been nine o'clock, not ten. With wide eyes and a thudding chest, Alicia darted into the living room to see for herself. Sure enough, above the fireplace, the clock gleamed quarter past ten. How had she let this happen? She had been so careful, and she had woken up so early too. Yet there was no denying what the clock said, which meant only one thing; Alicia was late.

"I have to go," she gasped, spinning on her heel to run into the hall. Her shawl hung on the stair railing, and she snatched it up, tumbling to the front door and yanking it open. There was no time to get her pelisse coat or to fix her shoe; the button had come undone in her hurry.

"Wait," Rachel insisted as she appeared by the stairs, "why the rush?"

"I'm late. God, forgive me for being so utterly incompetent."

"Hey, calm down-"

There was no time for that. Alicia thought she had ages, but in reality, she should have left fifteen minutes ago. If she took the shortcut through town, maybe she could make it with a minute to spare... no, she couldn't afford to think of a plan. Alicia had to go. With a hasty goodbye thrown across her shoulder, Alicia darted down her front steps, lurched past the gate, arriving in the quiet street. Then she turned left, towards town, and disappeared.

The streets were always quiet at this time of day. Most of the men

were already at work and the women at home with their children. People wandered through town, shopping or out to visit friends, but Alicia was thankful for the fact that nobody got in her way as she darted around corners and ran down streets. And while a few still paused to stare in wonder as she streaked past, nobody tried to stop her.

The marquess lived in Warwick Manor, as his family had for generations. It was situated near the center of town, yet still far enough away to offer privacy. Bordered by the woods on one side and a river on the other, it was known for its beauty. Despite the winding paths that Alicia was forced to take, it was also easy to get to. Alicia's shortcut thankfully took only fifteen minutes instead of the twenty-five it would have taken to go via the main streets.

Alicia careened to a stop outside of the enormous iron gates, gazing up at the manor in the distance. She was here, yes, but now she had to walk all the way through the gardens to get to the front door. Why did manors have to be so elaborate? Smoothing down her skirt, Alicia attempted to compose herself before striding past the gates and onto the path. Yet with every step, the house grew closer; and with every step, her nerves grew worse.

By the time she had reached the front door, gaze fixed on the beautifully carved door knocker, Alicia wanted to be sick.

Yet she didn't even knock before the door swung open, revealing an enormous foyer in shades of white and cream. A grand staircase spiraled up to the next floor, decorated with dark wood and silver engravings. Everything about this manor was stunning, and every time Alicia looked, there was something new to see.

A cough alerted her to the presence in front of her. A tall man in a doorman's suit looked down at her, brows raised. "Can I help you, miss?"

"Oh, uh, good morning!" Alicia stuttered, and she was all too aware of how nervous she sounded. "I'm here to see Lord Arvill about the governess position?"

"You're late," the doorman said coolly, "Lord Arvill wasn't expecting more people."

Already? Either very few women had applied for the job, or the interviews were so short that he barely spoke to them at all. Neither option reassured Alicia in the slightest, and her cheeks flared pink in embarrassment. "Please?" she asked quietly, "I don't wish to be a bother, but could you give me a chance?"

The doorman rolled his eyes. "It isn't up to me, miss. Come in and sit down, and I shall see if he wishes to speak with you."

When Alicia stepped inside, she was greeted with the true size of the foyer. It was enormous, the size of her whole house alone and then some. It wasn't completely barren, however. To her left, there was a collection of tall, plush armchairs and settees. As it was the only place to sit, Alicia could only assume this was where the doorman wanted her to go. Gently lowering herself into an armchair, she let her gaze roam.

"He will be with you shortly," the doorman announced, "May I have your name?"

"Oh. It's Alicia, sir. Alicia Sempill."

He nodded once and then retreated past the stairs and into a room beyond. In the silence, the closing door echoed into the foyer.

"Well," Alicia murmured to herself, "at least I'm here. That has to count for something, doesn't it?" It was no more reassuring than Rachel's words of encouragement, and Alicia's heart stuttered as she looked about. This was the home of a marquess. Of course, it was grand, but she had never felt so out of her depth in her life. She wasn't wealthy enough to attend balls or popular enough to be invited to parties, so this was her first experience somewhere so lavish. It was impossible to believe that people really lived like this.

After a moment of silence, the doorman reappeared. With his hands clasped, he was the embodiment of politeness, but Alicia didn't miss the strained expression on his narrow face. "Lord Arvill has decided that he will see you today, although he asked me to let you know that he doesn't abide by tardiness, miss."

"Of course." Alicia ducked her head, feeling that telltale blush creep across her pale cheeks once again. Even so, a rush of relief flooded through her, and she pushed back the desire to sigh. "Thank you, sir."

Am I to wait here?"

"Until he summons you, yes. If you need anything, one of the maids will see to it."

There wasn't a single maid to be seen, but Alicia kept those thoughts to herself. It was enough just to be here, to be allowed the chance to prove herself. Anything else was simply an added bonus that she wouldn't take for granted.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I have other duties to attend to."

Alicia's throat dried up, and she couldn't say a word, so she settled for a curt nod and watched him go. He vanished through another door, the click of his shoes disappearing with him.

Biting down on her lip, Alicia turned to gaze once more around the foyer. A darkened hallway led left, and to her right were two more doors, firmly closed. An eerie silence settled over the house, and Alicia wondered just where everyone was. Perhaps, because of the interviews today, the staff had been asked to keep to themselves.

There was no more time to dwell on it, because at that moment, a door clicked open, and the marquess himself appeared.

Chapter Two

The woman sitting across from James held a permanent scowl on her features, which were wrinkled into deep valleys and crevices. She had to be nearing sixty, and although James didn't want to be rude, he couldn't help but wonder how much longer she had left. Although going by her sharp eyes and ability to look at him as if he were dirt underneath her shoe, he decided that she was probably doing just fine.

"Harriet May, yes?" James asked coolly, regarding her with a blank expression.

"Yes, my lord. I heard about the governess position in the newspaper. Children need discipline, not to be left running wild like animals."

A pang of annoyance lit up James' chest as he sucked in a breath. He had mentioned only briefly that his siblings were on the rowdy side; this woman had no right to judge his family. He was a marquess, for goodness sake, and she didn't even know him. A headache was already forming in the back of James' skull, and he pressed a hand against his left temple. "Mrs. May, do you have any experience with children?"

"I have four of my own, all adults now, and they grew up into good, respectable people." She sounded so offended at the very concept that James thought otherwise, even though he had only asked a simple question.

He was starting to wish that he had turned her away at the door, but she had been the only one to show up for the governess position, and his options were slim. Slim being the kind way to put it. Injecting false cheer into his voice, James asked, "And have you ever cared for other people's children?"

"No, but my methods are simple. A strict schedule, good education, and a slap around the ears if they misbehave."

James felt the blood drain from his face. Never, not once in their

entire lives, had his siblings been hit. Not by his father and certainly not by him. If only Edwin was here, he was so much better with people...

"It sounds harsh," Mrs. May continued with a firm nod, "but it has to be done, my lord. Children can't grow up believing that the world revolves around them, you know."

He liked her less and less with every word she spoke. Already, he was resisting the temptation to ask her to leave. He hadn't even wanted to hire a governess in the first place and was only trying to do so because it was becoming clear he had no choice. James had to wonder if it was worth the hassle.

"Mrs. May," he said calmly, even as irritation rose in his chest, "if you are going to be governess for my siblings, you will follow my rules. I will explain it all should you get the position, but you are not to lay a hand on either of them." His voice took on an icy tone, but he couldn't help it; nor did he make much of an effort to control it, either.

Mrs. May sat up in her chair, back rigid, and let out a huff. "With all due respect, my lord, you must not know what is best for these children, otherwise you wouldn't look to hire another to care for them."

James felt his eye twitch; it was a nervous habit that he couldn't control, the eyelid flickering over his bright blue gaze. "With all due respect," he repeated back to her, "this is my family, not yours, and I won't have you disrespecting me in my own home."

Although she paled, Mrs. May didn't flinch nor apologize. He had to give her credit for that, at least, considering that usually, his harsh glare was enough to send people running. Really, he should have been grateful that she arrived at all. Most people weren't willing to go near Warwick manor; considering most of the town thought he was a murderer and all.

Shaking his head free of those thoughts, James straightened in his seat. "Now, you said that you had four children of your own - where are they now?"

"Why do you need to know, my lord?"

Oh, she was giving him a headache! This whole ordeal was like pulling teeth - painful beyond belief - but unfortunately necessary. "So that I might have an idea of how you raised them and have an expectation of how I should assume Jenny and Samuel will turn out, should I hire you."

Her watery blue eyes narrowed; her arms folded stiffly across her chest. "I can assure you they all have high-paying jobs in good fields and that I raised them to become only the best. I don't accept less than perfection, you see."

That wasn't the answer he had asked for, but James had resigned himself to the fact that he was wasting his time. He didn't want this woman, all harsh edges, anywhere near his siblings. He had hoped for someone soft and kind, with the patience of a saint - not some old woman who thought she was doing a service by acting rudely under the guise of discipline.

"Well, Mrs. May, thank you for coming in today. I have your address, and I'll be in touch via letter as soon as I've made my decision."

She looked about the room with a raised brow, wispy and white. "Really. I thought I was the only one to arrive?"

"I'm expecting more later," he replied evasively. Then he stood, gesturing to the study door with one sweep of his long arm. "Now, I would hate to take up more of your day, and I'm a very busy man myself. The doorman will see you out."

Mrs. May grumbled as she hauled herself to her feet. So unsteady were her spindly legs that James reached out to help, but she waved him away with a scowl. "I'm perfectly capable, thank you."

That was hardly the way to speak to someone of his standing, but James was so thankful to see her go that he couldn't even muster the energy to care. She wandered into the foyer, careful of the slippery tiles. When the doorman, Archie, offered assistance, she waved him away too.

Allowing the door to fall closed, James returned to his desk. The room overlooked the garden outside, with huge floor-to-ceiling windows that provided the perfect view of the beautiful flowerbeds filled with half a dozen different kinds of lavender. Usually, watching the scenery

eased him, but now it was almost impossible to manage even a smile. He wasn't going to hire Mrs. May, that much was obvious, but if not her, then who? Nobody else had turned up for the position, and with each passing day, it was more and more difficult to control his unruly siblings.

That wasn't to say that they were bad children. Samuel was sweet and generous when he wanted to be. It was just a shame that he loved to cause so much mischief. Jenny was no better, so full of energy that getting her to sit still was nearly impossible. Yet James knew them to be intelligent, gifted children who only missed their parents and didn't know what to do now that they were gone.

Squeezing his eyes shut against the oncoming headache, James took a deep breath to try and calm his thudding heart. He wouldn't allow himself to panic. What good would that do? He just had to try again and again until he found somebody trustworthy and kind enough for his siblings. And if that didn't happen... well, he would worry about that when the time came and not before.

A knock at the door alerted James, and his head darted up. "Come in." Who was it now? He had specifically asked not to be interrupted today.

The doorman, Archie, slipped inside. The door clicked closed behind him, but not before James caught sight of a dark-haired figure in the foyer. "There's a woman by the name of Alicia Sempill here to see you," Archie said softly, "about the governess position, my lord."

"Oh." Brows furrowed, he cast his blue gaze to Archie. He was getting old, but he was still a loyal employee and had been here since James' father, Richard, had been marquess. He knew how things worked here, and if he was willing to interrupt James despite specific orders, well, this Alicia Sempill must have been worth it.

"I know she's late, my lord, but she asked me to let you know she's here. She seems quite desperate, in fact."

Well, that wasn't too surprising. Nowadays, there were only two types of people to interact with James. Those who were desperate enough not to care about the rumors or those who were too stubborn to care. If Mrs. May was the latter, then Alicia was the former.

"Tell her I'll see her shortly," James instructed with a sigh, "but I don't appreciate her turning up so late. If it had been another five minutes, I'd have turned her away."

"Of course," Archie said smoothly, "I know you do so hate when people can't keep time. I shall tell her right away."

James watched as he slipped from the study and back into the cold foyer. He caught another glimpse of the mysterious Miss Sempill too - dark hair in a high bun and fair, delicate skin. She was surprisingly young for someone wanting to be a governess, and James couldn't help but wonder what had brought her to apply for such a position. Especially one here, no less.

Then the door closed, and he was alone again. Truthfully, after the disaster of Mrs. May, James wasn't sure if he could face another interview. Jenny and Samuel were upstairs now, in the playroom right above him. He couldn't hear their feet pounding on the floor or their laughter as they concocted some new mischief, but he knew they were there. It was where they spent most of their days when they weren't being homeschooled.

Well, he couldn't put off this interview forever. As much as he would have liked to, it was rude to keep someone waiting, even if they did arrive late. It was something he would have to mention; to make it clear that it was unacceptable. He hoped that Miss Sempill was at least polite.

Straightening his back, James flicked a strand of short black hair from his eyes and squared his shoulders. The least he could do was make himself presentable. Then he slipped from behind the desk and strode to the door, hand curling around the handle.

When it swung open, he was greeted by the empty foyer. Even in summer, it was always cold, the enormous space drafty even when there was no breeze. Today, it left a chill in the air that made him shudder, and he hoped that Miss Sempill wasn't too cold from waiting out here.

A moment later, her eyes landed on him. They were a bright, clear green visible even from this distance and shone in the dull light from the chandelier. Miss Sempill wore a simple navy-blue dress with long sleeves and a modest neckline, although it hugged her slender figure

nicely as she hopped to her feet.

"My lord," she curtsied and spoke quietly, her voice barely even echoing in the large entrance. "It's good to meet you. I apologize for not turning up on time, but-

"We can talk about that later," James cut in and led her to the study. She perched on the massive armchair that Mrs. May had recently vacated.

"Now," James said stiffly, "let's begin."

Chapter Three

"Do you have any children of your own?"

Heat gathered on Alicia's cheeks as she ducked her head. Straight to the point, then. "No," she replied softly, showing her hands, "As you can see, I'm unmarried."

Lord Arvill had such bright blue eyes they almost seemed to glow, especially in the light provided by the enormous windows behind him. Although the sky was still dull, the sun peeked from behind the clouds enough to give his skin and eyes a healthy glow.

"Any siblings or cousins? Perhaps you looked after your neighbor's children in the past?"

Alicia knew where this was going, and already nerves swelled in her stomach. "No, my lord. I've never looked after children before, but I'm a quick learner and I promise I can do whatever you need. They're your family, and I'll follow your direction."

His eyes narrowed in thought, and for a moment, Alicia thought she had said something wrong. Then he hummed appreciatively and scribbled something down on the paper in front of him. From across the enormous, wide wooden desk, she didn't have a hope of reading what it was. "You are aware that most governesses have their own style of child-rearing? While they take note of what it is the family wants, of course, they usually follow their own style and rules."

Alicia flushed hotly, wishing the floor would just open up and swallow her into its maw. At least, then she wouldn't have to go through the embarrassment of looking so incompetent. This was exactly what she had feared, and yet Rachel had told her not to worry!

"Am I to assume that you've never had this position before? I did think you looked awfully young, Miss Sempill."

She wanted to sink into her seat and disappear but forced herself to stay professional. No matter how embarrassing this was, it was still her last shot at getting a much-needed job. Without this, she'd soon be on the streets; a thought that made her stomach turn. "No, my lord, I haven't, but I believe the best tactic for unruly children has to be patience and kindness to teach them the right way to behave." After all, wasn't that how her own parents had brought her up before their deaths?

"And where have you learned this belief?"

The questions kept coming, and although she should have expected it, it still had Alicia's mind stuttering to keep up. She must have seemed so ridiculous to him, a child pretending to be a nanny. "Well, my own parents believed that harsh punishment only promoted guilt and mistrust. My Papa brought me up with kind words and comfort, and he never had to lay his hand on me." She paused, lip caught between her teeth. "I'm sure it doesn't work for everyone, but it worked for me."

Another low hum, blue eyes drifting down as he took another note. Lord Arvill's voice was deep and smooth, like the most expensive coffee, and some of the tension eased from Alicia's shoulders as she listened to his soft mutterings. "I think," he said after a moment, "that I agree. I don't believe in raising a hand to children. My father was always soft with me, and I think I turned out decently. If Jenny and Samuel had the chance to be reared by him, I'm sure they would have been the same."

Alicia nodded mutely. Her words had dried up, and she didn't dare speak in fear of saying something wrong. She could not risk messing this up, and she had learned that the best way to avoid that was to speak only when directly addressed. The less she said, the less room there was for error.

There was a beat of silence while Lord Arvill wrote, broken only by the scratch of his pen against the parchment. Then he glanced up, and his gentle smile made Alicia's chest flutter. "You've never worked with children before, but I can already see that you have a passion for it. To me, that's the most important part. Now, if you work for me, it will be strict hours, often long. Are you all right with that?"

Alicia didn't suppose she had a choice. She would work twenty-four

hours a day if she had to, just to get this job. She would work until she passed out from exhaustion, just to prove herself worthy of working for the Marquess of Warwick.

Although, a little part of her mind reminded her to think about those rumors. Are you sure you can trust him?

With some effort, Alicia pushed those thoughts aside. It was ridiculous to think this man had killed his own father, especially considering how he spoke about his family. His eyes lit up when he spoke about his siblings, and the gentle smile on his face was the sweetest that she had ever seen.

"I'm happy with whatever hours you give me, my lord," she replied sweetly, feeling that anxiousness stir inside of her. Even though she had begun to settle, she couldn't get completely comfortable until she knew the job was hers. If it was hers. "I will do whatever you need, whenever it's needed."

"Good," he murmured, and his lips quirked into another little half-smile. "You'll have a room on the premises if offered the position, of course, but be advised that my brother is due home from his travels soon." His eyes flickered to the door as if expecting him to appear. "We don't always get on, but I assure you he isn't any trouble. He never stays long anyway..." trailing off, Lord Arvill uttered a sigh. He seemed to snap back to himself, though, blinking at Alicia as if only just remembering she was there. "Anyway, I have a few more questions and things to discuss before making any decisions."

Her chest lurched, and Alicia nodded perhaps too vigorously, her bun tugging loose. A strand fell in front of her eyes, and she hastily swiped it away. Hopefully, she at least didn't look too disheveled after practically running the entire way here. Although her breathing had long since returned to normal, she still felt the uncomfortable cling of sweat despite the chill.

"I don't wish for details, because it simply isn't my business, but I need to know if there's anything in your life that could impact your ability to do this job." A deep breath, his eyes fixed on Alicia. "I won't stand for drama or excuses, nor will I allow my staff's personal lives to get in the way of their job." His earlier smile had vanished, and Lord Arvill was all business once again.

Alicia winced under his harsh gaze. She bit down on her lip but forced herself to meet his eyes. There was nothing in her life that could influence her. Since the death of her parents, the days had begun to stream into one. There was nothing to break up the monotony. Her life was, suffice to say, dull. She didn't say as much, of course, only murmuring, "No, my lord. I am happy to dedicate myself to these children, and I will keep my personal life completely separate."

Another scribble on the parchment, although Alicia noticed that no other papers were lying around. It suggested that he was taking notes on her alone, and truthfully, she didn't know what to make of that. Was it a sign that she did better than the other candidates? Or was it simply just a matter of looking professional? For all she knew, he wasn't writing notes at all, and it was simply for appearances.

Wincing, Alicia cast her gaze outside instead. The gray clouds were slowly drifting past, having cleared enough to give the barest hints of the blue sky. What sunlight managed to filter through was weak, but it still cast a beautiful glow across the garden. The garden itself was magnificent, stretching on for miles and miles in every direction-

"Miss Sempill?"

Head snapping towards Lord Arvill, Alicia felt her cheeks heat up. "Oh, I'm sorry - I was simply admiring the gardens. They're beautiful."

His expression softened, shoulders slackening. "They are, aren't they? The gardeners do most of the work, of course, but in the past, my father used to enjoy tending to the flowers in spring."

"That sounds lovely," Alicia replied - and she meant it. She had fond memories from before the death of her Mama, gardening together. They had spent hours in their little patch of land at the back of the house, planting flower seeds and vegetables and all sorts of things. Neither of them were good with plants, though, and most died by the end of the year. Still, it had been nothing if not exciting to watch the flowers grow.

"If you get the position," Lord Arvill said cautiously, as if too afraid to tell her outright that it was hers, "then you'll have free rein of both the manor and its land. However, the children aren't allowed to go alone; there's a lot of space for young children to get lost, even if they insist that they know the gardens as well as the house. Which brings me to

my next point," he continued, his intense blue eyes fixed back on Alicia, "Expected duties. You will be expected to know where they are at all times, even if they insist it isn't necessary. They are to have arithmetic lessons in the morning, reading and writing after lunch, and exercise in the afternoon. Following that, they are to wash and change for dinner, after which you will be dismissed. I would appreciate it if you could teach them history as well; is that something you can do?"

Her education wasn't as sharp as it could have been as she had only attended public school for the first few years. Papa had decided when she was seven that homeschooling was the way to go; after which, she had picked up learning tremendously fast. "I believe I can teach them the basics of English history, yes."

"What about geography?"

Alicia deflated, feeling disappointment fill her chest. "I'm afraid not, my lord."

His frown was gentle but still enough to make Alicia wince and shrink back into her seat. There goes my chance, she thought bitterly, and I tried so hard, too.

Except he didn't end the interview then, just like she expected. Instead, he simply shrugged his broad shoulders and said, "Well, never mind. I can always hire a specialist teacher for geography lessons. I don't expect you to know everything, Miss Sempill."

She tried to utter thank you, but all that left Alicia's lips was a drawn-out sigh of relief. Perhaps things weren't so terrible after all. In fact, she could almost let herself believe that things were going well.

"One last question," Lord Arvill said after a moment. He pushed the papers away and folded his arms, leaning across the desk to look her directly in the eyes. Alicia couldn't look away, and his intense expression never wavered. "Would you like to meet the children now?"

Oh. That was all? She thought that he was going to berate her or ask an impossible question that she couldn't answer. This, she could deal with. "I would love to," she replied, putting every ounce of false confidence into her voice. It didn't hurt to try, did it?

Lord Arvill stood, brushing invisible creases from his trousers. "They're upstairs in the playroom, which is coincidentally next to the room you will be using for lessons." He gestured to the door. "Now, they've never had a governess or even a nanny before, so I can't say for sure how they will react. I hope you understand that this will decide whether I hire you or not."

Alicia nodded as she scrambled to her feet, almost tumbling over her skirts in the rush. She was only trying to impress - but perhaps she was trying too hard, and only making even more of a fool of herself in the process.

Chapter Four

Lord Arvill led her up the enormous grand staircase, which had so many steps that Alicia lost count after twenty-two. The sound of their footsteps echoed throughout the entire entrance, eerie in the otherwise complete silence.

When they reached the top, Alicia was greeted with the sight of two long, dark hallways. It was probably too much effort to keep the entire house lit all at once, but she didn't particularly fancy the idea of wandering in the dimness. At either end of the hallway were windows that provided a thin stream of light the way.

"Jenny and Samuel are twins," Lord Arvill said as he led her down the leftmost hallway. "Nine years old, but they don't always act it. I would appreciate it if you could try to be gentle with them. Good impressions and all that."

Alicia only hummed in agreement, not trusting her words. She would treat them with the utmost kindness, of course, not least because they were the marquess' family but because they had lost their father. Perhaps it hadn't been an exceptionally recent loss, but Alicia knew from experience, that these things tended to hang around for years.

They finally reached a door unlike the rest; this one was cracked open just a touch so that when Alicia peeked inside, she saw a flutter of movement.

"Children," Lord Arvill announced, swinging open the door to stride inside, "there is somebody I'd like you to meet."

Laughter filled the room and filtered into the hall. "Who is it?" a childish voice asked, "A new friend?"

"Don't be silly," another voice chimed, "she's our new governess."

Lord Arvill smiled as he gestured for Alicia to come inside. "This is

Alicia Sempill, children. Say hello."

Nervously creeping further into the room, Alicia managed a smile. The two children in the middle of the room were surrounded by a multitude of toys - dolls and wooden toys and little pretend horses. The girl, all bright eyes and dark hair just like her brother, clutched a blonde-haired doll in a matching dress to her own powder blue one.

"Alicia, this is Jenny and Samuel. I apologize for the mess." He sent Samuel a narrowed-eyed look. Clearly, he knew just who was behind it all.

Samuel only grinned and fell back to the floor, where he scooped up a little painted horse and set it on his knee. "Would you like to play with us?"

Alicia's gaze flickered to Lord Arvill, looking for permission. It wasn't that she didn't want to, of course. She simply didn't know if that was allowed. The job of a governess wasn't to play, it was to teach and care for, and she didn't want to step out of line before she even knew if she had the job.

His answer surprised her, though. He broke into a beaming smile, beautiful on his full lips, and said, "Just for a while. We don't want to keep Miss Sempill here for too long."

Jenny darted over to slip her small hand into Alicia's, her grin wide with delight. "We were playing farmers," she said cheerfully, and then proceeded to all but drag Alicia to the spot they were playing in. The carpet was faded here, suggesting that they played here often. Then Jenny plopped down on the floor beside her brother and handed Alicia a wooden horse.

Until this moment, Alicia didn't quite know just how out of her depth she was. She glanced down at the expectant children, gnawing on her lower lip, before gently settling down across from them. The floor was hard and uncomfortable, and her dress got in the way when she tried to adjust her legs. She felt so out of place here. Not just on the floor, but in this house, too.

She felt even worse when Lord Arvill sat beside her. Although his legs were crossed neatly and his back was straight, the very picture of proper, Alicia couldn't help how strange it felt to have him so close. So

informally perched beside her.

He didn't pick up a toy to join the play but instead fixed his eyes on his siblings with a stern frown. "Now, do you remember what I said last night?"

Jenny and Samuel shared a look. Then Jenny piped up, "You said that when you got a governess, we were to be polite and respectful," she answered with a grin, "and not to cause any trouble."

"What else?"

"That she's here to teach us, not to be our friend."

Lord Arvill relaxed, although until now, Alicia hadn't even noticed how tense he actually was. "Yes, good," he replied softly, "so while you can play together today, don't expect it to happen frequently. Next time Miss Sempill is here, it will be under contract as your governess. If I decide to hire her, that is."

Alicia's eyes flickered to him, a frown furrowing her thin brows. It was becoming more difficult to remind herself that she wasn't in the clear yet, that there was still no decision made about her chances of becoming a governess. Swallowing down her nerves, she turned back to the children. "So, you were playing farmers? Have either of you ever been to a farm?"

"Of course not," Samuel laughed, his eyes sparkling. "Farms are dirty and loud. They sound fun, but James won't let us go."

Hearing Lord Arvill's first name aloud gave Alicia pause, green eyes swiveling back to him. James Arvill. It had a nice ring to it, she had to admit.

He only smiled and climbed to his feet. "We've no need to go to such places," he replied, "not when everything we need is here in town. Besides, I'm much too busy for impromptu trips these days." He shrugged, and Alicia didn't miss how he put some distance between them. As if remembering his place and hers. "Regardless, there is something I have to attend to. Please, carry on. I'll be back in a moment."

With that, he vanished into the hall.

James hovered in the hall for a moment before beginning to descend the staircase. Archie remained studiously by the entrance after reminding the various other staff to give James space today.

"Any other latecomers?" he asked, nodding towards the door. It was really too much to hope that some other aspiring governess had turned up while he was away, and he knew as soon as he looked at the empty sitting area that the truth wasn't what he hoped for.

"I'm afraid not," Archie replied with a shrug, "It would seem that all of your prospective new hires have already arrived, my lord."

"Only two," he murmured with a frown. "What kind of impression did you get from them, Archie? You know I always value your judgement." It was true - Archie had worked here since even James was a child; a constant and never changing presence in his life. Father had treasured his advice and ability to see people for who they really were, and now James did, too.

Still standing with his hands clasped behind his back, Archie relaxed only a touch. "I think," he said slowly, "that Mrs. May knows how to keep children in line. She is a little... brash, however."

That was one way of putting it. The woman had been snippy and short as if she were the one in charge. She was old-fashioned, too, and not in a sense that James appreciated. "What about the girl upstairs? Alicia Sempill?"

"She didn't say much to me, but I do get the impression that she is desperate for this job." His eyes flickered to the stairs, but of course, Alicia was nowhere in sight. "She's a touch younger than I expected but soft-spoken and modest. You could ask for worse, my lord."

That was certainly true. Earlier that morning, when interviewing Mrs. May, it had become clear to him that a governess was not in his future. With the arrival of Alicia, however, things had changed. She was indeed softly spoken, kind - and from what he saw of her, excellent with children. Whether she had the skills and knowledge, he couldn't tell, but she had the determination.

"Thank you for your time, Archie. I should get back now."

Archie only inclined his head as a way of acknowledgment, a small smile on his lips. "Of course," he replied smoothly, "I hope all goes well."

The journey back upstairs seemed much faster than the journey down. As he traipsed through the halls, the sound of children's laughter filled the house. It gave him pause, a smile creeping across his face. Yes, Jenny and Samuel laughed all the time; but it had been a long time since he had heard such loud, genuine laughter. Unhindered and joyful.

When he opened the playroom door, he was met with the sight of Jenny nestled on Alicia's lap, clutching her favorite doll while grinning brightly. Samuel, splayed out across the floor on his back, was stacking up a dangerously high pile of wooden horses.

All three of them froze upon catching sight of James. Alicia was quick to scoop Jenny from her knee and set her aside. Perhaps he imagined it, but it looked as if Alicia's cheeks had flushed a brilliant pink, almost hidden beneath her dark freckles. "I'm sorry," she murmured softly, "we were just playing. I hope we weren't too loud?"

James felt himself soften as her wide green eyes fixed on him. Now that her blush had faded, she was ashy pale with fright. "It's perfectly all right," he answered, "I'm glad you're getting to know each other." It was the least he could do to ease her nerves, he supposed. "Now, I think that's enough for today. I'll send you a letter at the end of the week to let you know if you have the position or not."

A little hand tugged at his sleeve, wide blue eyes turned to stare at him. "Please," Jenny murmured, "hire her now. I really like her!"

"Jenny, dear, there's a lot to consider--"

"The only other option is that horrid old woman," Jenny said with a wince, "but Miss Sempill is so nice. Please, James?"

Now Samuel was staring at him too, eyes enormous and pleading. It wasn't often that they really asked for things, at least not so desperately. It was becoming increasingly obvious just how much they wanted this. It had taken some convincing for them to agree to a governess in the first place. James had little space to complain.

"All right," he answered softly to which Jenny hugged him. "But only because Mrs. May was such a terrible candidate."

When he turned, somehow managing to pry Jenny away from him, Alicia was gazing at him with a hopeful expression on her slender face. She was so young for a governess, with no prior experience in teaching or childcare, but James still felt the bloom of warmth in his chest when he looked at her. "Miss Sempill," he said, "you have the job."

She looked fit to cheer, bright eyes sparkling in the light from the window. Hopping from foot to foot like a baby bird, she exclaimed, "Oh, thank you. You've no idea how much this means to me, my lord."

"Don't get too excited," he warned, "you haven't even started yet. You will start on Monday at eight o'clock, and I will go over what is required in detail."

She nodded, dark hair bouncing. "Of course. Thank you."

He looked her in the eyes then, his bright blue and hers, forest green. "And Miss Sempill? Please do arrive on time."

A scarlet blush overtook her delicate features, and she ducked her head in embarrassment. "Yes, my lord," she murmured, unable to meet his gaze. "I'm so sorry." Her flush darkened as she ducked into a quick curtsy, eyes fixed on the floor.

"Don't be," he replied, "you can make it up to me by working extra hard on your first day."

That, at least, earned him a nervous smile.

Chapter Five

"Do you really have to leave so soon?" Rachel complained. She sat surrounded by odds and ends from around Alicia's house, slowly picking through each one to decide what pile to put it into - the pile of things to take or leave.

Alicia didn't really own all that much. Her family had hardly been poor, at least before her parent's untimely death, but they had never been materialistic people. She supposed that she should have made it easier and yet she couldn't bear to throw away a single item. Now she was staring down at Mama's old jewelry box, made of silver and ornate amethysts, rolling it over in her palms. "You know I need this," she said softly, "I need the work and the money - and anyway, a governess almost always stays with the family."

"I'll miss you," Rachel grumbled. Full lips formed a childish pout as she collapsed back against the bed, a small oof leaving her. "It will be so dull without you."

"We'll still see each other," Alicia reminded. Lord Arvill's manor wasn't all that far, considering. The town they called home was hardly big, although it was no village either. Regardless, Alicia wouldn't be far away. Still, she couldn't ignore the anticipation rolling in her stomach, or the nerves.

"Is he at least paying you well?" Rachel asked with a huff. "Oh, and is he handsome? You know, I've never had the luck of meeting a marquess in person before."

Of course, Rachel always loved a handsome man, and Alicia had to admit that he had a certain charm. He was older than her, although only by a few years. There was something about his inky black hair and vibrant blue eyes that certainly had appeal. "He's my employer, Rachel," she answered, "I can't be talking about him like that. You remember what happened last time?" Alicia began shoving dresses into the trunk with more force than needed, a scowl overtaking her.

"I remember," Rachel answered softly; when Alicia looked up, her expression had taken on a sympathetic look. "But that wasn't your fault, Alicia. You know that."

It didn't matter what was or wasn't her own fault; because at the end of the day she had been caught with her employer and quickly dismissed. She had only worked there for three months before being kicked out as if she were a stray dog that had accidentally wandered in. The fact that she hadn't actually wanted anything to do with the man was irrelevant. Men were good liars, and nobody was going to believe the poor little maid.

From laundry maid to governess, Alicia should have supposed that she was lucky to have such an opportunity. And she was, truly, but she couldn't help the thoughts that swirled in her mind. You'll fail, an inner voice teased, something will go wrong like it always does. Maybe Lord Arvill will take a liking to you too, and he won't take no for an answer. At least he doesn't have a wife to find out.

Shivering, Alicia snapped back to the task at hand, only to see that her hands had clenched so tightly that the fabric of her dress had crumpled and creased. Throwing it into the trunk alongside the others, she snapped the lid closed. "I can always come back if I need anything else," she announced, "It's not like I'm going to sell the house." If this job ended as poorly as the last, Alicia would need somewhere to return to. The thought made her stomach turn, but she shoved those thoughts aside. "What else will I need?" she asked instead.

Rachel shrugged, hoisting herself upright once again to glance around the room.

Alicia's bedroom was small but nicely decorated, with pale blue walls and shiny wooden floors. The bed was adorned with a pile of fluffy blankets and matching pillows, perfect for those cold nights huddled against the chill. She had even kept some of her old toys. Rachel and Alicia's gaze fell on her old stuffed rabbit at the same moment, and a smile curled at Alicia's lips. "Remember when Mama bought me that rabbit, and I scarcely let it leave my side for months."

"Are you going to take it with you?" Rachel asked, "It seems a shame to leave it in an empty house."

Truthfully, she hadn't touched it in years. It had sat on a shelf above

her vanity, watching over her like a silent protector. "I won't take it," she decided after a moment, "Lord Arvill already thinks I'm young for a governess. I don't want him thinking I'm a child. Besides," she added quietly, "I'm too old for toys now."

"Then... can I have it?" Immediately, Rachel waved a hand as a smile creased her pretty features. "Not because I still like stuffed toys or anything. Just, you know, as a reminder of you."

I'm not fleeing the country, she wanted to say, but the words caught in her throat. Instead, Alicia stood to pluck the rabbit from his high shelf, then padded over to gently place him in Rachel's waiting arms. "Keep it safe for me," she said sternly, "and put it somewhere nice."

"Of course," Rachel beamed, hugging the rabbit to her chest. Alicia didn't believe for a second that Rachel didn't still love stuffed toys. Then she straightened up, features slipping back into a serious look. "Now, let's finish packing. You've got a big day tomorrow!"

Alicia only rolled her eyes, a smile gracing her soft features, and returned to sorting through the items strewn across the bed.

Chapter Six

This time, when Alicia arrived at the enormous Warwick Manor, she was early. Better early than late, she supposed, even as her stomach rolled with nerves. With a shaking hand, she reached out, slender fingers wrapped around the solid iron door knocker.

The doorman answered again, and this time he even managed a strained smile. "Good morning, Miss Sempill. Good to see you arrived on time today."

Alicia nodded bashfully as Archie stepped aside to let her in. The heavy trunk banged against her leg with every step, and it had been achingly difficult to drag it all the way from home. Well, it wasn't really home anymore now that she was moving into the Warwick property, was it?

"I can take your luggage up to your new room, Miss Sempill." The doorman stretched out a hand, hefting up her trunk as if it weighed nothing. Although he was an older man, his strength far surpassed Alicia's own. "You'll be staying in the guest wing for now until something more permanent is set up for you. I'm afraid that Lord Arvill has been too busy to find you a proper room yet."

Truthfully, that suited her just fine. A part of her had assumed that she would have been staying in the servant's quarters with the maids, which only proved how little she really knew about this governess business. Swallowing thickly, she managed a weak smile. "Thank you... I'm sorry, I don't think I caught your name."

"Archie, ma'am."

"Right, Archie. Thank you."

He inclined his head in acknowledgment, then gestured to the office at the far end of the foyer. "He's waiting for you inside and instructed me

to let you go in yourself."

Alicia's stomach rolled with nerves, but she fought it down with a nod of her head. She had been here before, met Lord Arvill before, so this was nothing new. Except that it was because she was now officially a governess with a job and duties and responsibilities. No matter how hard she tried, those nerves refused to be quashed.

Still, she managed to keep her head held high as she knocked politely and waited. Remember your manners, she reminded herself, it won't do to make a poor impression on your first day. So long as she remained professional, everything would be fine.

She had told herself that at the previous job too, hadn't she? And look how that turned out. It hadn't stopped the gentleman of the manor from taking a liking to her, or from cornering her in the study one day, or from his wife catching them together and assuming the worst-

"Come in," a voice called from inside, and Alicia was jolted from her thoughts with enough force to send her mind reeling.

She pushed open the door and peeked inside. Lord Arvill sat at his desk with a pile of letters in front of him, hands clasped neatly. Nervously, Alicia inched further inside, letting the door thump closed behind her.

"Ah, Miss Sempill, it's good to see you. I presume that Archie took your things upstairs for you?"

"Yes, thank you," she murmured in response. The study was just how she remembered it. The big windows overlooking the garden, the oversized furniture that would never have fit into her study back home, the bookshelves lined with all sorts of novels. She even spotted a gardening book or two, and she concluded they must have been his father's.

"Sit, please. I don't expect you to do any work today, of course. You'll have a week to settle in and get to know the children before any governess duties begin."

Alicia hadn't even realized she was holding her breath until she collapsed into the armchair and let out a deep breath all at once. She winced, lips parted to apologize, but Lord Arvill hadn't even noticed.

Or if he did, he was exceedingly polite.

"I expect that you will settle in quite quickly," he continued with a faint smile, "and if either of my siblings give you any trouble, please let me know."

"I'm sure they'll be just fine," Alicia replied, too quickly. This had to go well, but she was dimly aware that she was trying too hard to agree with everything Lord Arvill said.

He glanced at her from across the table, blue eyes boring into her. Alicia fought back the urge to look away, but it was actually Lord Arvill who turned first. She must have been mistaken, for it looked like a faint flush had spread across his angular cheeks. "Now, I have a list here of what Jenny and Samuel's old teaching schedule was like when I used to do it myself. You can choose to follow it or create your own. Jenny struggles with writing but can read just fine, and Samuel kicks up a fuss whenever he has to learn history, so please be aware of these things."

Alicia gulped, taking the paper from Lord Arvill's hands. It was almost exactly what he had explained during the interview; arithmetic in the morning and reading after lunch. Outdoor exercise before supper if the weather is good, otherwise it was a short history lesson instead.

"Now, if you need anything - whether it be for the children or yourself - don't hesitate to ask. I try to take excellent care of my staff, and I value your input."

Perhaps it was only that Alicia's past experience with employers was so poor, but it struck her as odd just how kind Lord Arvill was. Yes, he was a little distant and still retained a respectable distance, but he wasn't harsh or cruel like some men were. How people could believe that he was a murderer, she really had no clue.

Shaking her head to free herself of the thoughts, Alicia offered a kindly smile. "Thank you, my lord. Would it be too much to ask for a tour of the manor? So that I might learn my way about."

"I suppose I could spare some time," he answered, "I've been sitting at this desk all day and could stretch my legs a while. Have you seen the gardens?"

"No, my lord."

"Then let's begin there."



The sun beamed overhead, bright and hot, but the humidity of the heavy air made James shiver. He had always preferred the gentle warmth of spring to the overbearing heat of summer. Especially when he spent long afternoons stuck in the study, where the glass windows trapped all the heat, and it became sweltering.

Alicia ambled by his side, keeping pace with him remarkably well for a woman so short. James himself was tall and slender, where Alicia was simply small all over. That wasn't to say she looked frail because there was a quiet strength to the way she carried herself, arms held loosely by her side as she looked about the gardens.

"It's beautiful," she murmured, and it seemed that she didn't know where to look because her gaze shifted this way and that, the bright green of her irises practically glowing. "I've never seen so much space before in my life."

James found himself smiling as he led her up a gentle incline. This was his favorite part of the gardens - secluded from the rest of the grounds and surrounded by trees, a little sitting space greeted them. It was shaded from the roasting hot sun and overlooked the woods that surrounded this side of the manor.

Truthfully, he hadn't even realized where he was leading her; this was too far out to be of relevance to show Alicia around.

Still, her eyes widened, and a smile crept along her lips, and it was a sight far more beautiful than the nature all around them. "I've never seen anything like this before," she murmured, "it must be so lovely to live in a place like this."

He didn't mention that technically she lived here now too. Instead, he simply nodded. "It's a beautiful place, and I know I'm lucky to live here. If only Jenny and Samuel appreciated it quite so much. You can go anywhere on the grounds that you please, of course, but I would suggest not letting the children too close to the woods. There are no proper trails or paths, you see."

"I'll keep that in mind," Alicia replied softly. She kept her distance, James noticed, more space than was perhaps necessary. It was perfectly acceptable for her to walk beside him, and yet she hovered just slightly behind and to his left. How odd.

"We should return to the house," he said then, turning to gesture back down the path, "The hallways seem confusing at first, but I promise you will get used to them. You won't need most of the house anyway, only the lower floor and children's rooms."

Silence fell across the two as they walked, and James found himself glancing at Alicia from the corner of his eyes. She was attractive, he couldn't deny that with those shining green eyes and pale skin splashed with freckles. He had never seen somebody with freckles so dark or intense, but they suited her so perfectly he simply couldn't imagine her without them.

When they reached the manor, James tore his eyes from Alicia's beautiful visage to step inside. No matter how hot it was outside, the foyer was always cool, and he let out a small sigh of relief. "You know where my office is," he said, turning to Alicia once more, only to pause when he caught the expression on her face.

She was looking around the foyer as if she had never seen it before, jaw slack in an almost smile. Then she blinked, seeming to come back to herself, and smiled bashfully. "Oh, I'm sorry. Did you say something, my lord?"

If it had been Jenny or Samuel, or even Archie, he might have felt a prickle of annoyance. As it was, he simply rolled his eyes. "Miss Sempill, you're going to have to pay better attention than that."

Her cheeks flushed scarlet, and she looked away, hands tugging awkwardly at her sleeves.

His chest twinged in guilt, but he shook those thoughts away. Miss Sempill really would have to pay better attention to fit in here. And do her job. "As I said, you already know my office. The living room is beside it. We have two drawing rooms, joined by an archway, although those are only used when guests are here."

Alicia drank in everything he said with a nod, eyes drifting from one door to the next. So, she could pay attention when she wished, then.

"The kitchen is down that hallway, which also leads to the stairs for the servant's quarters. You won't have much need for those, but it's useful information nonetheless."

Her green eyes flickered over to him, a smile on her lips. "And the dining room, my lord?"

"To the left. A governess doesn't usually eat with the family, but we have plenty of room, and the company would be nice, considering I spend most of my free time around two very mischievous children."

A laugh bubbled from Alicia's throat, only to be muffled by her sleeve slapped across her face. "I'm sorry," she murmured, and she looked so utterly horrified that James felt a pang of sympathy.

Was it his fault, he wondered? Was he being too strict, too formal? Was she intimidated? Of course, if she were, it was likely because she knew the rumors about his father and believed that he had been the one to kill him. James had loved his father, and such accusations were nothing short of ridiculous, but he couldn't do anything against lies that had already been taken as truth.

Biting down on his lip, James stifled a sigh. Then he turned to the staircase and said, "Would you like me to show you the upstairs?"

Alicia smiled softly, and James didn't think too closely about why that simple expression made his heart flutter.

Chapter Seven

The week passed with surprising swiftness; one morning, it was Monday, and then before she knew it, the weekend was fast approaching. Alicia spent most of the time trying to learn her way about the manor, with its twisting hallways and cavernous rooms. Every time she thought she knew where to go, she'd end up lost again, but it got a little easier with each day.

Of course, plenty of her time was occupied by the children. They were attentive and enjoyed it when she spoke about her home, even if Alicia herself didn't find it particularly interesting.

"You didn't have any staff?" Jenny asked disbelievingly, "not even maids?"

Alicia's nose crinkled as she resisted the urge to smile. Oh, how these children had grown up so differently from the majority. "We had a maid, but she didn't live on the premises. She came three times a week to do basic chores, but the rest we did ourselves." They could have afforded a live-in maid, but Mama and Papa hadn't wanted Alicia to grow up taking these things for granted. It was a good thing too, considering she had ended up as a maid herself not so long ago.

Jenny, who was sitting cross-legged on the sofa as she tried to wind her hair into a braid, frowned. "You didn't have a cook? How did you eat?"

"We cooked our own meals."

This seemed to genuinely puzzle her, thick brows narrowed in thought. The braid began to unwind as Jenny let her hands fall into her lap. "This must be really strange for you," she muttered as if the concept had only just occurred to her. She turned her big blue eyes on Alicia. "Do you miss your home?"

Bending to poke the fire, Alicia cast the girl a glance. "I miss the

people. My friend Rachel, my neighbors, but I don't miss the house itself." It held too many memories. Papa, smoking cigars by the window. Mama in the kitchen, kneading dough while she hummed a quiet tune. Having only been here for five days so far, Alicia supposed that the reality hadn't quite settled in just yet. Perhaps that was why she didn't miss home?

Jenny returned to her braid, combing through the curls with a huff because she had to start again. Samuel, meanwhile, was content to warm his hands by the fire and listen.

Mischievous, Lord Arvill had called them, but all that Alicia saw were two bright, curious children. Perhaps the mischief would come later, but for now, they seemed perfectly happy as they were.

"Your parents must miss you," Samuel added after a moment. He craned up his neck to see Alicia from his position on the floor, his blue eyes flickering with the fire. "I know I miss Papa, but he's gone, so I won't ever see him again..."

Alicia's heart clenched for the poor boy. Offering him a smile, she ruffled his bouncy curls as she wandered past. "My parents are gone too," she replied softly, "They died two years ago of consumption - but you don't want to hear about that, do you?" Alicia smiled as she sat down in the overstuffed armchair, she had claimed as her own. She was the only one who ever used it, anyway. "Now, why don't we go outside and get some fresh air before the sun goes down?"

Jenny eagerly climbed to her feet, bounding past both Samuel and Alicia to reach the playroom door. "Okay! Can we go through the maze?"

"You know you always get lost," Samuel huffed, "it's the same way every time! How can you never remember?"

Jenny stuck out her tongue before turning heel, and then she was darting off down the hall with a musical laugh.

Rolling her eyes, Alicia stared fondly after her. "Come on, Samuel," she said lightly, "we should go after her before she does get lost in the maze." Alicia was completely willing to believe such a thing was possible; she had gotten lost in silly places plenty as a child. Hauling herself upright, she urged Samuel to go on ahead before turning to

follow.

Only to see Lord Arvill standing by the door. He always seemed to have a gentle smile on his face, even when he wasn't thinking about it. It was endearing, really, and made Alicia's chest flutter. "Hello," he said softly, "I thought I would come and check on you all now that I'm finished work for the evening." His eyes flickered down to Samuel, who was hopping anxiously from foot to foot. "You can go after her if you want. I won't keep Alicia for long."

Glancing between the two, Samuel only offered a shrug before darting off to find his sister.

Alicia watched him go, then cast a nervous look towards Lord Arvill. They hadn't been alone since her first day together, and that was honestly down to Alicia herself. With the children always around and so many staff occupying the manor, it had been quite easy to avoid being alone with him. Until now apparently.

"What can I do for you, my lord?" she asked nervously. She remembered the last time she had been in a situation like this; she had been alone with Lord Ashton in one of the rooms upstairs. He had leaned close, and Alicia had tried to pry herself away from his vice-like grip, but he hadn't let her go and instead only grasped her tighter. Then Lady Ashton had stormed into the room-

"I was only wondering how you were settling in? I must admit that you're better with the children than I could have hoped for. They like you."

Alicia's eyes fluttered back up to Lord Arvill, chest shuddering. "Oh, thank you." She had to stop doing this, letting her worries get the better of her. Taking a deep breath, Alicia forced herself to meet his eyes. They never ceased to stun her, so bright and clear. "I like them too," she replied softly, a smile curving at her lips. "They're sweet children, and I can't wait to begin teaching them."

"You think they're sweet now, but you'll see." Lord Arvill broke into a smile, and it was such a beautiful look on his sharp, handsome features. "Really, though, I'm delighted at just how well you all get along. I worried that they wouldn't like their new governess, regardless of who she actually was. You, Miss Sempill, have a gift."

Alicia's chest bloomed with warmth at the sweet compliment, a grin spreading across her cheeks. Remember your place, she reminded herself before she could do anything embarrassing. She was, after all just a member of Lord Arvill's extensive staff, and that was the way it would stay. Shaking her head, Alicia took a step back to peer around him. "If you'll excuse me, my lord, I should get back to the children. Heavens knows where they've gotten off to."

Before she could so much as take a step, Lord Arvill blurted, "One more thing, if you could. A more personal question if you don't mind."

Brows raised, she turned to him. "I don't see why not. What is it?"

"Why did you apply for the position, knowing who I am?"



It was a silly thing to ask, and James knew it. It didn't matter why she chose this job over any other or why she had wanted to be governess to his siblings. All that mattered was that she was here, with them, and already doing well despite having been here less than a week.

For a moment, Alicia only blinked at him. Alicia. He already thought of her by her first name. In fact, James had been thinking of her as Alicia almost since day one. Strange, considering he always made sure to keep a level of distance between himself and his staff, more out of necessity than anything else-

"I'm not sure what you mean, my lord. Could you explain to me?"

James snapped back to attention with a huff of surprise, his heart leaping against his ribs. "Oh," he answered, "well, I'm sure there are much less demanding jobs out there. Governess jobs, too, as well as all sorts. Why choose here, specifically?" Why choose to work for a man everyone thinks is a killer, he added silently.

Alicia pursed her lips. Sometimes, when she was thinking deeply, her head canted to the left and had her dark hair cascading over her shoulders. When she did speak, her voice was soft. Wary. "Truthfully," she murmured, "because of the money. Both of my parents are gone, and I was burning through their savings faster than I thought imaginable. I had worked before, as a laundry maid, but that didn't work out..."

Although his curiosity was piqued, James held his tongue. He knew that work wasn't always easy, especially for women. A lot of affluent people treated their staff terribly; took advantage of them, even. James would have rather died than become one of those types. "Well, I'm glad you came," he replied - and he meant it. Alicia had arrived just in time - late or not - and saved him from choosing between no governess or a terrible one.

She seemed to brighten at the compliment, only for her radiant smile to falter again. Alicia ducked her head and took a step back, expression turning wary. "That's kind of you to say, my lord." It looked as if she wanted to say more, lips parted even though no sound revealed itself. For whatever reason, James knew she was holding herself back.

It was because she believed the rumors, of course. Nearly everybody did, even those that claimed otherwise. Especially those that claimed otherwise. Over the last few years, James had gone from being a respected member of society to an outcast. The kind of man that people crossed the street to avoid. It seemed logical that even someone as sweet as Alicia was only here out of desperation, and that she thought the same as everyone else did.

Taking a breath, James stepped aside to let her go. "I only say it because it's true. Now, I won't hold you any longer - please make sure my siblings haven't destroyed the house in the few minutes they've been gone."

Alicia let out a soft laugh, muffled by the hem of her shawl. "Of course, my lord. Thank you." Then she slipped from the playroom with a soft smile, quickly vanishing down the hall.

James watched her go with a faint smile on his face, aware he must have looked silly but unable to stop himself. Sweet Alicia was too good for a place like this, but nonetheless, he felt a burst of gratefulness that she was here. It was easy to see that she was exactly what the children needed; kind and patient, gentle without being too timid. Most of all, she treated everyone here with respect. Although he found himself wishing that she weren't quite so distant. James had been doing distant for years now, and a part of him wished for the familiarity of friendship.

Of course, that was impossible, given that Alicia was now his sibling's

governess. Not to mention the fact that she would never have been interested, given his current status. Although he knew that many women desired the courtship of somebody wealthy and influential, James was not one of the men that they sought after. Not when half the town believed he killed his own father.

Shaking his head, James turned to leave. He wandered back downstairs alone, trying to push those thoughts aside. It did him no good to reminisce nor to wonder about what things could have been. This was how things were, and he couldn't do anything to change that.

Chapter Eight

"If you want to eat with Lord Arvill, you should," one of the maids offered kindly as she set the meal down in front of Alicia. "He already told us to set an extra place at the table for you, and you're all eating the same meal anyway."

Alicia stared down at the soup in front of her. It smelled delicious; fresh vegetables and exotic spices that she couldn't even name, all blended into one delicious meal. This was just her starter, and Alicia had to admit that this was far better than anything she ever ate at home. "Thank you," she said to the maid, whose name she believed was Joyce. "It was very kind of him to make such an offer, but I don't feel it's appropriate. I feel bad enough that I get better treatment than the rest of the staff."

Joyce waved a dismissive hand, features crinkling into a smile. She had to be a few years older than she or Lord Arvill, but her skin had a healthy glow that still suggested hidden youth. "Now, don't you worry, dear. I remember when Lord Arvill and his brother were young; we had a governess then, too. That's just how it is, you see."

Even so, Alicia couldn't help the stab of guilt as she took the spoon into her hands. It was all so formal, so uncomfortable, especially in this big old dining room, too. What kind of house needed two dining rooms? This one was big enough to host a whole family, and yet there was a layer of dust on the side tables and china cabinets that suggested it hadn't been used in years.

Joyce stepped back to allow Alicia to enjoy her meal, offering a kind smile before disappearing. Alicia wished she would come back; it was so quiet and empty in this huge room. Every clink of her spoon and shift of her feet echoed so loudly in the quiet. The heave of her breaths drifted all around and swallowed her up.

The main course was a healthy serving of roast beef and vegetables served with thick, rich gravy and potatoes. Just like everything else that was served, it was delicious, but Alicia couldn't hope to finish it

all. She was a small woman used to more modest portions, and Papa had always claimed that she ate too little. Whether that was true or not was beside the point because Alicia was happy to finish quickly, if it meant leaving this spooky old dining room. Even after almost a week, she wasn't used to it. It was even stranger than eating alone back home because at least then she knew there weren't others eating just one room down.

Joyce and another maid made quick work of removing the dishes as Alicia climbed to her feet. "Lord Arvill and the children are still eating," she informed her lightly, "and you have the rest of the evening to yourself. I'd enjoy it, considering things will only get tougher on Monday."

"How so?"

"Well, you'll be officially acting as governess," Joyce replied. "That, and the fact that Lord Arvill's brother, Edwin, will be arriving on Monday evening."

Oh. Edwin? She remembered Lord Arvill mentioning a brother during her interview for governess. Hadn't he said something about his brother traveling? Well, she supposed that nobody could travel forever, no matter how much money they had.

"They don't always get on, you see," Joyce continued in a hushed tone. The crockery was gone now, the other maid had taken it to the kitchen, but Joyce lingered. "I know it's none of my business, but sometimes I wonder if Edwin doesn't travel to get away from this place." Then Joyce shook her head, a low sigh escaping her lips as she cast her gaze to the ceiling. "Anyway, you didn't hear that from me, okay? You go and enjoy your evening now, ma'am."

Alicia turned slowly towards the door, staring into the empty hallway for a long moment before ambling towards the foyer. It was none of her business, really, and yet Alicia still couldn't help the curiosity that welled in her chest. She would be meeting the elusive fourth Arvill family member soon, she supposed, if he were due back in three days.

So lost in her thoughts, Alicia didn't even notice when a figure appeared in the hall. They knocked shoulders, and Alicia spun to face them with a gasp. "Oh, I am so sorry!" When she looked up to see Lord Arvill, her face paled. "Oh, it's you. My lord, please accept my

apology-

"It was just an accident, Miss Sempill," he insisted. He had shifted back to put space between them, but he still reached out a cautious hand as if wanting to soothe but not knowing how. "It gets dark in these halls during the evenings. I'm sure I asked someone to light the lamps."

Alicia's cheeks tinged pink. Oh, how she hated how obvious it was on her fair skin, but thankfully her freckles hid the worst of it. "It was my fault," she said gently, "I should have paid more attention, my lord. I was going to retire to my room for the night, but if there's anything you need..?"

"Nothing tonight, Miss Sempill."

"If you're sure." She had this strange, growing need to please Lord Arvill, putting herself out to ensure he was satisfied with her work. It was a strange dichotomy when combined with her desire to remain professional, and therefore spend as little time as possible in his presence. She couldn't mess things up if she did only, what he asked. "I'll be going now, my lord," she said quietly, inclining her head as she turned to leave. Alicia felt his gaze on her as she hurried down the hallway, and her heart skipped with every lurching step.

Why did she feel like this? This strange desire to be near him, to make him pleased, didn't at all fall in line with her need to remain professional. Somehow, Alicia just knew that her feelings were only going to grow.

Chapter Nine

"Oh, well done! That's right. Now, let's move onto the next chapter. Jenny, could you read it aloud for me, please?"

The sound of pages turning echoed through the quiet manor, followed by the soft sigh of Jenny as she prepared herself to read. "Do I have to?" she complained, and James swore he could hear the pout in her voice - if that were even possible.

"Yes, Jenny. You know how this goes; we each read a chapter, and then we practice our writing. The quicker you do it, the quicker it's over." A soft sigh, Alicia's this time. "Would you feel more comfortable if I went first?"

"...Maybe."

"Or is this your way of trying to get out of reading time altogether?"

Samuel snorted out a laugh, such an inelegant sound, before chirping, "Jenny can read just fine, but she thinks her reading voice is ugly. Maybe because it is!"

Ah, here they went again. The two argued so rarely, but when they did, it was always because Samuel started it. The boy had a smart mouth and knew exactly how to rile up poor Jenny, who only ever followed Samuel's lead.

But as James listened, he noticed how calmly Alicia handled it. She was a different person with the children; calm yet filled with warmth, never awkward or shy. It added to James' theory that she felt awkward only around him.

"Now, Samuel," Alicia chided sweetly, "that wasn't kind. What did I say this morning about treating your sister respectfully?"

Samuel puffed out a breath and muttered, "Just because I think it's

funny doesn't mean it is."

"Exactly. For that, you can read first."

This was usually the point in time where Samuel would have caused a fuss, complaining loudly or outright refusing to do as he was asked. Memorably, he had once become so horrified by the idea of having to do extra work that he had stormed from the room and hidden under his bed. It had taken James and the maids half an hour to find him.

Now, however, he simply grumbled something under his breath. There were no raised voices or storm of feet towards the door, just a little huff and the rustle of a book. Then, Samuel's soft voice carried through the house.

James took his chance to enter, pushing open the door to step inside. The room they used as the classroom was adjoined to the playroom, although it was much smaller. Alicia sat behind a big desk with her legs pulled up beside her, elbows resting lightly on the polished oak. Across from her sat both Jenny and Samuel; the latter was holding a copy of Robinson Crusoe.

"A bit advanced for nine-year-olds, isn't it?" James asked, pointing towards the book, "but if you can get them to read it, I won't complain."

Alicia flushed, which was something she seemed to do a lot of nowadays. Or perhaps she always did, and James simply didn't know because he hadn't met her before. "I wasn't sure what their reading level was, so I picked a random book from the library. I used to read this as a child, but I always did have a strange taste in literature."

"It isn't strange at all," he reassured, "and it's only your first day. I'm sure there are plenty of novels for you to read together. If you can get them to read, that is." He ruffled Jenny's hair, which only earned him a scowl. "How is your first day, by the way?"

She blinked up at him, and he noticed how her hands twitched nervously, perhaps in thought. "I think it's going well, my lord," she replied, "Arithmetic went well, and I didn't have to correct any answers. You have two very intelligent younger siblings, even if they do enjoy complaining." She shot Samuel a teasing smile - only to suddenly straighten, cheeks flushed even darker. "I'm sorry, my lord, I

don't mean to step out of line."

She hadn't. Quite the opposite, in fact. He enjoyed that she was so comfortable around Jenny and Samuel. It wouldn't do to have her treat them formally or like her superiors. They were only nine, for goodness sake. He parted his lips in reply, only to realize what she had actually meant; she wasn't worried about offending the children, but rather him. How absurd. "It's all right," he answered, "I want you to enjoy yourself here and be comfortable. Now, have you all eaten yet?"

"We finished numbers so quickly that I thought we could squeeze in some reading before lunch," Alicia replied, "That's all right, isn't it? I know you said I could adjust their schedule, but I'd hate to presume."

Step out of line. Presume. Was he really so intimidating that the poor woman was afraid to do anything of her own accord? He had tried to be kind, tried to reassure her, and only make himself known if there was a reason. Yet even after that, Alicia still believed him to be someone to worry over.

Those rumors dig deep, he reminded himself with a scowl, people will believe anything.

Yet hadn't she seemed to enjoy herself that first day when they walked through the gardens? Or was it little more than wishful thinking.

"Can we take a break, Miss Sempill?" Jenny's voice piped up, snapping James from his thoughts. "I'm starving."

When Alicia smiled, the corners of her eyes crinkled just the tiniest bit. James loved that about her - the little imperfections that only made her more lovely. Not that he thought of her as lovely, but... well, she was. "Of course," she said cheerfully, "remember to wash your hands and be back in an hour. We'll read then."

The children clambered to their feet, squeezing past the desk chairs that were too heavy to move and darting into the hall. Their voices followed them downstairs until it drifted off into silence.

The silence continued as Alicia stared at the desk. There was nothing there, no papers or book, yet she stared at the blank wood as if it were the most interesting thing she'd ever seen.

"You should eat too," James said, shattering the uneasy silence as Alicia's head darted up. "I believe it's roast chicken sandwiches today. Or soup, if you'd prefer something hot."

Alicia shifted, biting down on her lower lip. She seemed to do that often, although James had yet to figure out why. Whether it was a nervous habit or simply subconscious, he had no clue. "I could eat," she said eventually, "and the weather is nice."

"You could eat outside," he offered softly, "or we could eat together." It was a silly offer because she refused to eat supper with them and spent almost all of her time exclusively with the children. Yet, he couldn't shove down the bloom of hope in his chest.

Finally, Alicia's eyes darted up, and she smiled. "All right. I'd love to."



It was improper to eat with your employer; Alicia knew that. She had tried so hard to keep the boundaries between them, never extending a hand of friendship for fear of repercussions. Lord Ashton hadn't needed friendship to make advances on her, but she had remained adamant that if she kept her distance, so would Lord Arvill. He was, after all, a far more respectable man than her previous employer, regardless of what the rumors claimed.

In a moment of impulsiveness, she had already agreed. Now she had no choice but to go along with it. She only hoped that Lord Arvill didn't take this the wrong way. She settled into the wooden bench, head tilted towards the sky and soaking up the warm sun. Summer was truly here now, for which she was grateful. Alicia had always loved the sun.

The bench creaked under Lord Arvill's weight as he perched beside her. He carefully untied the knot on their lunches before letting the cloth fall open, revealing thick, fluffy white bread and generous cuts of meat.

"You have such good cooks," Alicia confessed as she unraveled her own meal. At her own request, the cook had provided her a slightly smaller portion, as well as a single, bright red apple. "I feel spoiled to be able to eat their food every day."

"We've had the same cooks for as long as I can remember," Lord Arvill replied as he took a bite of the sandwich. He chewed thoughtfully, and just the sight of such delicious food made Alicia's stomach growl.

She took a bite of her own - and oh, she was right. It was fantastic. The bread was soft and fluffy, with a crispy crust that paired well with the juicy chicken and lettuce. She had never been a fan of uncooked vegetables, but the lettuce still added something extra to the sandwich. It was simple and yet somehow still the best sandwich she had tasted.

"If there's anything specific that you like to eat, let the head cook know. She'll be happy to make something out of the ordinary once in a while."

Alicia wasn't about to go asking for special favors, especially not from the other staff members. It was already becoming increasingly obvious that the governess was held in higher standing than the rest, and although nobody seemed to mind the hierarchy, Alicia was hardly going to risk angering people she hardly even knew yet. It was a nice offer, however, so she smiled and nodded anyway. "Thank you, my lord. I don't wish to sound rude, but... is there a reason that you asked me to eat lunch with you?"

Lord Arvill stared down at the meal on his lap. It was a much less formal affair than supper, almost on equal standing with the sort of thing Alicia would have eaten back home. After a moment he said, "There is something I need to tell you, yes, because my younger brother will be returning home soon. Yet that's only a fraction of the reason; the truth is, I simply wanted to spend time with you."

Spend time with her? No, this was improper, even with Nora standing a few feet away. Without thinking, Alicia scooted right to the edge of the bench until her thigh dug into the uneven wood of the armrest. Yet it would have been rude to say no to a marquess, and her boss at that, so Alicia didn't leave. Instead, she cleared her throat and asked, "Why so? With all due respect, my lord, I'm only a governess."

"Yes, but you're also interesting. Great with the children too - I've never seen them so quiet or well behaved."

Alicia looked down at her food, taking a bite of the sandwich. The second taste was as good as the first, and she managed a smile. "It's

just patience and perseverance, my lord. I think they're trying to impress me, too; I'm sure the novelty will wear off eventually."

A laugh bubbled up in the back of Lord Arvill's throat, quickly hidden by a drink of the coffee flask at his side. "Yes, well, let's hope not," he replied softly.

"Speaking of siblings, did you say something about your brother?"

Lord Arvill winced, and the laughter died on his tongue. "I did," he answered, "Edwin will be coming back later tonight. He's been in London, you see. He was in Scotland before that and Wales, too - but that's irrelevant. I just want you to be aware that there will be somebody else in the house, at least until he decides to leave again."

Alicia's stomach flipped. The frown on Lord Arvill's lips was so unlike what she expected of him, and it left her wanting nothing more than to reach out and reassure him. She held back and settled for, "Do you not want to see him?"

"Oh, it isn't that," he assured her, "I haven't seen him in almost six months. He simply hasn't been present much, since our father died, and the last time we truly spoke was a long time ago. I can only hope he's matured some since we last spoke."

Having grown up an only child, Alicia didn't know what it was like to argue with siblings. She knew what it was like to argue with family because she had often fought with her father as a child. It had always been about silly, trivial matters; she had the impression, though, that Lord Arvill's matters with his brother went much deeper than that. "Lord Arvill."

"Please, call me James. Or Lord James will do - there will be two Lord Arvill's here now, and I've always hated the formal title."

Alicia bit down on her lip, resisting the urge to reply. The line kept blurring, and now she wasn't sure where she stood. Even more frightening was the fact she was no longer sure if she cared. When her eyes flickered up to look at him, Lord Arvill's gaze was cast out across the garden.

"I hope you don't think I'm being too forward," he offered gently, "I only want you to be comfortable here. I'm not like my father - I don't

care for titles and prestige. I'm only the marquess because I'm the oldest, although truthfully, I don't think Edwin would be capable of handling such a title anyway."

If Alicia had been here for longer, she wouldn't have minded referring to him by his given name. As it stood, she had only been here a week; it simply wouldn't do to be referring to him so casually. "With respect, my lord, I would prefer to keep using your proper title."

His lips pursed at her words, but he didn't protest. Instead, he offered a smile. "Of course," he answered, "whatever you're comfortable with. I'd hate to frighten you off; I don't think I could find another governess as good as you."

The praise had her cheeks flushing scarlet, an unfortunately common occurrence these days. Why she wasn't sure, or perhaps it was more that she wasn't willing to think about it. Tugging at a loose strand of dark hair, Alicia said, "This brother of yours, is he kind?"

"Exceptionally, when he wants to be. His immaturity is outdone only by his generosity, which is never something that people expect."

Just like Papa, then. Papa had been a loving man with a childish side, and so his deep, unwavering kindness had often come as a surprise to those who only knew him on the surface. Mama had seen the real him, though, and loved all aspects of him. That was why they were so good together and why they had enjoyed twenty-four years of marriage before passing in their sleep.

They had died together, just twenty minutes apart.

Lord Arvill's concerned features swam into her vision, and Alicia snapped back to reality with an apologetic smile. "Sorry," she murmured, "I was lost in thought."

He smiled - and just like it always did, that beautiful expression lifted her spirits. Alicia shouldn't have been thinking of him as beautiful at all, yet here she was anyway. With those high cheekbones and striking sea-blue eyes, he was certainly unique.

Shaking her head, Alicia turned back to her lunch. "I should get back to the children. They'll be almost finished by now." Of course, it was an excuse, but that didn't matter. Thoughts were whirling about in her

mind, and she didn't know what to do about it. Alicia knew she shouldn't have allowed herself to partake in something so unprofessional. So ridiculous. Not just because of what happened with Lord Ashton, either. Alicia couldn't guarantee that if this continued, she wouldn't end up falling for the marquess.

He studied her silently, hair blowing gently in the breeze. The sun cast a healthy glow across his cheeks and made the dark shadows of his cheekbones even more striking. Yet his expression was filled with concern as he said, "Are you sure? You've barely eaten."

"I can eat it in the classroom," she replied, too quickly. Climbing to her feet, Alicia tucked the half-eaten meal back into the cloth. "Excuse me, my lord. I'll see you this evening." Not allowing herself time to doubt, she quickly turned and scurried off towards the manor. The doors left wide open seemed to embrace her as she entered the huge foyer. Then, without looking back, she darted upstairs.



James watched Alicia go, his brows furrowed in confusion. Had he done something wrong? He had assumed that eating together would have provided the chance to get to know her, when considering that she was spending hours with his siblings seemed important.

And yes, all right. if he was completely honest, he also wanted to know more about Alicia simply because she intrigued him. Her life was a mystery to him, and every time she spoke, James found himself hanging onto her every word. She was simply so stunning that he couldn't help himself; her voice was like the most beautiful piano piece, and her eyes shone like the most expensive gems.

Now she was gone, all but sprinting back inside before he could so much as utter another word. It didn't take long for the realization to settle in - he had scared her off after all. Asking her to sit with him, the informality, it had probably all contributed to convincing poor Alicia that he was up to something foul. After all, if he was a murderer, what else was he capable of?

Appetite thoroughly ruined, James folded the leftovers back into its cloth and hauled himself upright. There was no sense in staying here, feeling sorry for himself, especially not when he had to prepare for Edwin's return.

As if summoned by the very thought of him, Edwin's voice called out, "James! Good to see you again. How have you been doing?"

Fantastic. He was even earlier than James expected.

Chapter Ten

The carriage rolled to a stop outside the manor, almost perfectly beside where James stood. Edwin's face stuck out of the wide window, a grin on his face. Then Edwin climbed down without even allowing the coachman time to assist and landed on the hard ground with a *thud*. When he opened his arms wide, it was clear that he meant to embrace James.

Instead of accepting the hug, James settled for placing a hand on his broad shoulder. They were similar in many aspects, from their dark curls and unusually bright blue eyes, but that was where similarities ended. While James had a lean, slender sort of muscle about him, Edwin was all hulking shoulders with a broad, solid waist and bulging arms. In his younger days, James had been jealous; now, not so much. Edwin might have gotten the looks, but he was still no closer to finding a wife than James was.

"How have you been?" he asked, flicking long hair from his eyes. "I do hope the children aren't giving you trouble? Oh, and how is our dear Lady Agatha?"

Oh. *Agatha*. Amongst the chaos of having a new governess in the house, James had forgotten about her entirely. "She hasn't been around lately," he replied with a shrug, "Perhaps she finally sees that I'm not interested in her affections."

"Or perhaps she's scheming something new," Edwin interjected with a laugh. His laugh was just as grating as James remembered, although not quite as loud or boisterous. "Regardless, there will be plenty of time to talk later. Charles, could you bring my bags in please?"

The coachman, evidently named Charles, nodded solemnly. He wasn't one of James' coachmen, nor was this James' coach because Edwin hadn't bothered to write and give a proper time of arrival - well, if that meant he had to hire his own coach, that was his fault, not James'.

Oh, simply being around him was making James feel childish! That was quite the statement, considering he lived with two children.

Yet Edwin didn't make crude jokes at James' expense like he might have done, and there was a little spark of hope in James that he had finally matured. As Charles began to collect heavy luggage from the back of the carriage, Edwin took the time to glance up at the manor. "It's been a long time since I've seen this beautiful place," he murmured, "Have you changed anything in my absence?"

"Only things you won't notice," James shot back, but a smile curled at his lips, "Your room is untouched, I promise."

"Good. Then I shall feel right at home tonight, back in my own bedroom. Shall we go inside?"

They walked in together, up the stairs and into the cavernous foyer. A chill followed them inside, although by now, James hardly noticed it. The foyer was always cold because it was huge and round, and the ceilings were too high to trap in the heat. Still, he loved his home and wouldn't change it for the world.

Edwin slowly pivoted on the spot, gaze cast across the foyer as if drinking it in for the first time. When he ascended the stairs, he trailed a broad hand gently across the banister, as if greeting an old friend after many years. "You've kept this place well," he said softly - then his eyes drifted across the stairs to settle on something else. "Oh, and who do we have here?"

Alicia made her appearance, smiling bashfully, as she descended the last few steps. "Jenny needed a drink," she said, "Apologies for the interruption."

"Nonsense," James replied instinctively, "my brother here was just reminiscing. Miss Sempill, this is Edwin. Edwin, this is our new governess."

Edwin quirked a brow, and a slow smile crept across his features. "A governess? My, you look so young yourself! Hardly old enough to have such a drab, boring job."

Alicia flushed - and with her hair held back in a loose bun, it became clear that even her ears had turned pink. "It's only my first day, my

lord, but I'm enjoying it quite well."

Edwin's smile was kind, but there was a mischievous glint in them, too. The little ones had to have gotten it from someone, and nobody else in their family was like that. "Well, I'm glad," he replied - and he reached out to put a gentle hand on Alicia's shoulder. "Will you be staying with us long?"

"As long as Lord Arvill wants me here." Her gaze fluttered to James, a nervous smile crawling across her face.

He couldn't blame her for her nerves; Edwin had that effect on people, even when he wasn't trying. Perhaps it was his handsome features or his strong build, but he had an unconscious habit of making people - especially *women* - nervous. James tried to ignore the stab of jealousy as he interjected, "Miss Sempill will be staying here for as long Jenny and Samuel need her. Or as long as she can stay."

Apparently soothed by his voice, Alicia relaxed. James didn't miss, how she gently slid out of Edwin's reach before inching closer to the kitchen hallway. "I'm happy to stay as long as needed, my lord," she answered cheerfully, and yet her smile didn't reach her eyes. "If you'll both excuse me, I have to get back to the children." Then she turned, scurrying down the hall that led towards the kitchen. She didn't look back, and soon enough, she was swallowed by the curve in the hall.

Her behavior was odd recently - or perhaps it had always been so - but at least James had an explanation for this. Edwin. Whether intentional or not, the poor woman was clearly uncomfortable around him. James made a mental note to mention it later, should it continue. Recently reunited or not, he wouldn't have his own brother making his staff uncomfortable.

When he turned back to Edwin, it was with a smile. He *was* making a stab at this happy family thing, after all. "I'll let you get settled in," he said, "Find me in the study if you need anything."

"Of course," Edwin replied, "I'll be in my bedroom unpacking."

Edwin left, and once again, James was alone. He sighed, dropped his head into his hands, and tried to fight back the developing headache in the back of his skull.

Jenny sat at Alicia's feet, idly playing with two dolls. She murmured under her breath, different voices for each doll, and tilted their heads and limbs as if in conversation.

Alicia didn't really *need* to stay with the children after lessons, but Jenny was happy to sit in peaceful quiet, at least for now. Samuel was off doing who knew what, leaving rare peace to settle over the playroom.

"Edwin came home today," Jenny piped up suddenly, "He's been away for a really long time, and he never stays for long."

"Oh?" Alicia replied. Their home lives really weren't any of her business, and she didn't want to overstep... but at the same time, curiosity swelled inside her. "I met him earlier. He seems nice." *Nice* perhaps wasn't quite how she would have phrased it, but Alicia had only spoken to him ever so briefly.

Jenny shifted, wide eyes turning up to look at her. "I don't like him."

Alicia's chest stuttered. "You don't like your own brother?"

She shook her head, a frown overtaking her pretty young features. "No, I don't," she replied firmly, "James says they used to be really close, but when Papa died, Edwin changed."

Alicia shouldn't have been listening to this. What would James have thought if he knew what secrets Alicia was listening to? Surely he'd throw her out of the house or punish her in some other way. She was just a governess, and their business was their own.

"I think they had an argument, but I don't remember." Jenny scowled down at the dolls, which were now laid across her lap. "Then Edwin went away for a long time, and James said he was traveling, but I know he left because Papa died."

Without thinking, Alicia reached to brush a strand of hair from Jenny's eyes. She had such lovely hair - a rich, perfect black with a few strands of deep chestnut brown. Bleached by the sun, probably, because the two children spent a lot of time outside. "Adults have complicated lives," Alicia soothed, "and sometimes it's difficult to

understand why we do the things we do. But James and Edwin, both love you, I'm sure of it."

She only shrugged and hauled herself to her feet with a stretch, arms pointing for the ceiling. "That's what James always says too," she replied. "Anyway, Edwin won't be here for long, and then he'll be gone again. I wonder where he'll travel to next?"

Alicia parted her lips to reply, although what she planned to say was a mystery even to herself. She never got the chance to reply – because, at that moment, there was a shriek from one of the other rooms, followed by thundering footsteps as someone tore through the hall.

"What on earth," Alicia murmured - and then she was darting into the hall, head whipping from one direction to the other as she searched for the source of the noise.

A maid was leaning heavily on the tall metal banister that overlooked the foyer below. She clutched it like a lifeline, breathing heavily.

"What's wrong?" Alicia murmured, a careful hand on the maid's shoulder. She didn't yet know the names of all the staff, but this poor woman was hardly older than a girl. Sixteen at most and terrified, she looked close to throwing up.

"I was just - I was changing Lord Arvill's sheets, and there's a dead *rat* on the pillow! Oh, he'll be so angry if he hears about this."

Alicia frowned, biting down on her lip as she turned to glance into the room. It was enormous, with a ceiling height wardrobe made of carved wood and a beautiful carpet of gold and blue. It was impossible to see the bed from here.

That was when she heard stifled giggles from the playroom. There was a flash of movement as Jenny poked her head into the hall, a grin lighting up her face.

It clicked, then, but perhaps a moment later than it should have. "You," Alicia said coolly, as dread washed over her, "that's why Samuel wasn't with you. What did you do, Jenny?"

The girl only shrugged narrow shoulders, laughter drifting through the hall. "I didn't do anything! All Samuel wanted me to do was distract

you."

So, everything that Jenny said about her brothers and her father was all nonsense to keep her occupied while Samuel planted something in the bedroom? Alicia's stomach turned. "Please tell me you didn't put a dead *rat* in Lord Arvill's bed?"

Jenny only beamed. "No, silly! It's just a toy."

Relief spread through Alicia so strongly that the world spun. She clutched the banister, just like the maid, as a rush of embarrassment took over. "Could you please check the bed again?" she asked the maid, "and tell me if it's a toy?"

The poor girl shivered but did as Alicia asked. Carefully, she crept into the bedroom and disappeared out of sight.

"You're in big trouble," Alicia snapped, "You frightened the poor maid half to death."

"It's not my fault she's easy to frighten."

Alicia's hands clenched, but she forced a deep breath from her lungs and let it out in one long, slow exhale.

By then, the maid had returned holding a lump of matted gray fur, dangling by its tail pinched between her fingers. "It's not real," she said, cheeks flushed in embarrassment, "just a silly children's toy. I don't even know where they found this." She ducked her head, cheeks now scarlet. "I'm sorry for overreacting, ma'am."

Ma'am. It felt odd to be referred to as such, but Alicia wasn't going to complain. She was only glad that the panic was over. Not that there was any need to panic in the first place, apparently. "Jenny," she said coolly, "could you please find your brother and bring him here?"

Jenny's smile slipped, and she managed to look guilty as she crept into view. "Yes, miss," she replied before scuttling off down the hall.

"Please don't say anything to the lords," the maid murmured. Even though she was still staring pointedly at the floor, Alicia saw how her eyes squeezed shut. "If word gets out that I overreacted like this, I'll be

ruined."

Alicia squeezed her hand, just a little, with a soft and reassuring smile on her lips. "It's all right," she replied, "you got a fright and reacted accordingly, that's fine."

She sniffled, wiping at her eyes before tears could fall. "You don't understand," she murmured, "Lord Arvill, Lord Edwin, I mean, he's back now, and he likes things to be in order. He doesn't accept any kind of failure of duties, even a little slip up like this could-"

"It's *all right*," Alicia said again, cutting in before the poor girl could panic anymore. She was shaking even as Alicia held her hand, shivering as if the hall had suddenly dropped in temperature. "I won't breathe a word of this to anyone, nor will the children. I'll make sure of it."

The maid nodded, even managing a tiny smile. "Thank you," she said softly. Then, "you're the new governess, right? I never got your name."

"Alicia Sempill," she replied kindly. "And you?"

"Nora. Nora White."

"Well, Nora, it's lovely to meet you. You go do whatever you need to, okay? I've taken up enough of your time."

The girl only offered a wavering smile before reluctantly detaching herself from Alicia's side. She slipped into the bedroom, letting the door fall closed behind her, and vanished from view.

Well, what an eventful day. Alicia couldn't say she was happy about it, but the sudden burst of adrenaline had her wide awake. She turned, peering down the hall, but Jenny and Samuel were nowhere to be seen. *So much for bringing her brother back here*, she thought sourly. Apparently, they intended to make her work hard to discipline them, and Alicia had no idea where to start. It wasn't as if she had much experience, save for her few younger cousins and next-door neighbors. That didn't really *count*, or so she thought, because that was years ago when she used to babysit for other people, and it was for children that she already knew.

Still, Jenny and Samuel couldn't be allowed to get away with it,

especially since poor Nora had been frightened half to death. So Alicia set off to find them both and give them a piece of her mind.

She found them ten minutes later, hiding under Jenny's bed and giggling wildly. Alicia made them sit on the bed with their hands folded, gave them a long and boring lecture, and made them promise to do better.

Whether they would or not, Alicia didn't know, but it was worth a try.

Chapter Eleven

It was evening by the time Alicia crept downstairs looking for a drink from the kitchens. Exhaustion clung to her as she trudged through the winding halls, scrubbing at her eyes, and begging herself to stay awake. Looking after Jenny and Samuel was even more difficult than she anticipated, and it had left its mark in the dark circles beneath her eyes. Still, she hoped that there would be no repeat of earlier today now that she'd given them a telling off.

The house was silent as she wandered into the kitchen, reaching for the glassware kept in one of the many cupboards. It felt wrong, somehow, to be creeping around at night, even if she was only trying to quench her thirst. James had said that the house was hers to wander, but it felt equally wrong to betray his hospitality, though.

Alicia was returning to the hall when she heard footsteps. So quiet they were easily missed, steps padded across the wooden floor. Then, voices.

"Edwin," James' familiar voice muttered softly from a living room next door. "How long will you be staying this time?"

There was a hum as if someone were deep in thought. "I don't know. A few weeks, maybe longer. There's nowhere that I need to be right now, and I'd like to take a break from traveling."

James sighed, and Alicia could just picture him running a hand through his thick, dark hair. It was a nervous habit, one that Alicia herself shared. "If you're going to stay, could you please refrain from making my staff uncomfortable?"

"I don't believe I've made anyone uncomfortable, brother."

Alicia cringed. They were talking about her, weren't they? She hadn't realized she was so obvious in her discomfort when she met Lord Arvill earlier. In fact, she had assumed she was doing quite an

excellent job of hiding it. She frowned as she crept closer into the hall, ears straining to hear the conversation. It was none of her business, really, but now that she knew they were talking about her... well, she could be forgiven for her intrigue, surely?

James sighed, and there was a shuffle of feet as he perhaps moved to sit down. "Miss Sempill is new to this home, and I want her to feel comfortable here. Especially considering she's in charge of the children. *You*, Edwin, made her feel uncomfortable today with your sudden interest in her."

There was a soft laugh, deep and masculine, before Edwin replied, "I've always had a weakness for attractive women, and this Alicia Sempill is beautiful. Why do *you* feel the need to defend her so?"

"Because she's under my employ, and while she's under my roof, she'll be treated with respect. Either improve your manners, Edwin - or keep your distance."

Alicia's stomach flipped at his words. Was he really standing up for her? Truthfully, he didn't need to; Alicia was perfectly capable of caring for herself. Even so, it made her heart bloom with warmth. He must have cared for her to say such things to his own brother. Or perhaps he was this defensive over all his staff; he certainly treated them all well enough. Either way, Alicia found a smile curling at her lips.

Perhaps Lord James Arvill wasn't so bad after all. Not that she ever thought he *was*, but this was the only evidence to support what she already knew.

"Now, I have a busy day tomorrow, and I'm sure you do too," he was saying now, a sigh leaving his lips, "Try not to get yourself into any trouble, yes?"

Edwin only grunted in reply, a terribly inelegant sound that had Alicia fighting not to laugh. Then he stood, and Alicia heard the patter of his footsteps as he left the living room.

She ducked back, pressing into the darkness of the kitchen as Edwin's silhouette darted past. She squinted after him, but he had vanished within seconds.

She wanted to thank James for his kindness. Thank him for defending her, even if it hadn't been all that important to begin with. It was late, though, and she wasn't about to admit that she had been eavesdropping on a conversation she had no business in. So, once she was sure that Edwin was gone and James wasn't about to follow, she crept back the way she had come.

The manor fell silent again, broken only by the dull thump of Alicia's footsteps as she climbed the stairs. She was sleeping in a guest room rather than the servant's quarters, in the right-wing which she soon discovered, was never used. She had practically the whole wing to herself, although the other rooms were all dusty and unused, and once she stepped into the hall, there was no more need to sneak.

Moments later, she was back in the familiar bedroom, tripping over the curly rug as she stumbled in the darkness. She should have brought a light, but then she might have ended up being seen, so in the end, it worked out fine. Setting her glass of water on the bedside table, Alicia once again curled underneath the thick blankets and cuddled deep down into the warmth. This bedroom was unlike anything she had ever slept in before. It was hardly as grand as the rest of the house, modest by Lord Arvill's standards, but comfier even than her old bed at home.

As if giving her a job and allowing her to live here wasn't enough, he had defended her against his brother. He was a kind and generous man, regardless of what the rumors said. As Alicia drifted off to sleep, it was with the certainty that those rumors were a lie.

Chapter Twelve

The next morning, it was as if yesterday had never happened. The children settled down for lessons with eager smiles and bright eyes; the memories of yesterday's scolding apparently put to the backs of their minds.

Alicia was happy enough with that, greeting them with a smile of her own. "Have you both eaten breakfast?" she questioned, "It's important to eat before school."

They nodded in sync, Jenny with a bright smile and Samuel with more relaxed enthusiasm.

"Good. I thought today we could start with reading."

Samuel frowned, thick brows knitting together. "But we usually start with arth - arithma - *numbers*."

Alicia couldn't help but smile as he stumbled over the words. "Arithmetic?" she offered, "I know that's what Lord Arvill said, but I don't suppose it matters the order as long as we get it done. Besides, you did so well with it last time, I was hoping you two might come to *enjoy* reading."

Jenny and Samuel shared a look. They shrugged. "I don't like reading," Jenny said quietly, "but I'll do it. Besides, if we do it in the morning, it just means it's over faster."

That wasn't *quite* the enthusiasm that Alicia had hoped for, but she took it with a smile. "How about you start today, then?"

Jenny grumbled - but she dutifully slid the book from the desk and into her hands. It was so big and heavy that she had to hold it in both arms, flipping the page awkwardly, but soon enough, it was lying open on her lap. "Do I have to?"

"Half of this is all about confidence," Alicia said kindly. She meant it, too - if you *pretended* to be good at something, soon you realized you weren't actually faking it any longer. "Just take it slowly and read it a bit at a time. You'll get there."

She crunched up her nose and leaned in close to the book - probably closer than she needed to - as if trying to hide her face from Alicia and Samuel. She *did* begin to read though, in a clear but halting voice that rang out through the otherwise quiet classroom.

Only to be cut off when the door creaked open, knocking against the wall, and a tall figure materialized in the doorway.

"Edwin," Samuel groaned, "you're not supposed to interrupt when we're having lessons!"

Lord Edwin Arvill, broad shoulders filling up the doorway, only smiled. "Not so long ago, I was the one giving you these lessons."

"Yeah," Jenny chided, "then you disappeared to Italy for two months and didn't even send a letter."

Perhaps, Alicia thought, *what Jenny said yesterday wasn't just a distraction*. The thought made her chest hurt for the poor girl. Although it was none of her business, it didn't make the ache any less.

Edwin simply smiled and rolled his eyes. "Jenny, sweetheart, I know I haven't been around recently, but can't you just be glad that I'm back?"

She huffed and sank lower into her seat, head tipped back to stare at the ceiling. She had her back to Edwin now, pointedly ignoring him.

Well, this was awkward. Alicia looked from Jenny to Samuel before letting her gaze land hesitantly on Edwin himself. He was tall and broad, much like James; but he had a more youthful, almost childish sort of face that was somewhat at odds with how he held himself. He was too young to be so overconfident, Alicia thought.

"And how are you settling in, Miss Sempill?" he asked after a moment, his smile wide and friendly. *Too* friendly. "I must say I'm surprised that my brother hired a governess; he was always so adamant that he could do everything himself."

There was no good way to answer that, and Alicia fumbled over her words as she tried to reply. "I have settled in fine. Thank you, my lord." She tried to smile, but it fell flat on her face.

Across from her at his own desk, Samuel muffled a laugh behind his sleeve. Of everyone, he seemed to be the only one here truly comfortable.

"James is treating you well, I hope?" Edwin raised his brow, questioning.

Was he *trying* to get a rise out of her, or was it an all-natural charm? Without even meaning to, Alicia found herself frowning. "He's a very generous employer and has given me everything I need to adequately take care of the children." Still seated behind her desk, Alicia reached for a pen and began twirling it anxiously between her fingers. A droplet of ink splashed onto her knuckle, but she ignored it.

Edwin's smile seemed to falter. Was it because she didn't give him what he wanted, or had he simply grown bored? It felt rude to be judging him like this, not just because she didn't know him but because he was a *lord*, for goodness sake. Yet his sly little smile made her skin crawl, and she hoped he would leave soon.

It seemed that her wish was granted because he brushed black hair from his eyes and announced, "I should leave you three to it. Good luck, Miss Sempill, my siblings can be quite a handful."

"I'm sure I'll manage, my lord."

With that, he vanished off down the hall without another word, humming as he went.

Taking a moment to collect herself, Alicia took a breath and forced herself to set the pen down. "All right children," she announced, "back to work, please. Jenny, you were going to read first today. Why don't you start at the top of the page, please?"

The morning carried on without incident, after that. They read for half an hour before moving on to writing, which both Samuel and Jenny struggled with. It wasn't that they *couldn't* write; quite the opposite because their comprehension was excellent, and they took to it like ducks to water. The problem was how *terrible* their handwriting was.

It seemed that when their brothers taught them, the focus had been on the words and phrases themselves without ensuring that their handwriting was up to scratch.

Alicia spent two hours with them, going over the basics of letter shapes and how to write in clear, form script. Cursive would have to come later. *Much* later.

Eventually, though, it was time for lunch, and the children raced downstairs to eat. Alicia trailed after them, stopping in the foyer to admire the beautiful garden through the window.

"Taking a break?" A familiar voice asked from behind; Alicia spun to see Lord Arvill standing by the bottom of the steps, the study door open behind him. "I hope the children have been behaving."

Alicia thought of poor Nora and the horrible rat prank that Samuel planned. She had promised not to breathe a word, though, and Alicia was always one to keep her promises. "They've been delightful," she answered simply, and it wasn't entirely a lie. For the most part, the children *were* lovely. The prank didn't make them any less so because Alicia had the feeling it was mostly borne of a desire for attention.

James smiled, relief evident on his face. "Thank goodness. I worried for a while that they would be too much for you. Sometimes they're too much even for me."

Alicia felt a pang of sympathy for him; he had so much on his plate without having to think of two wayward children running about. Alicia wasn't sure how useful she really was here, but she hoped she at least made it easier for him to focus on other things. If that meant having to deal with their antics, then so be it.

James' gaze flickered outside, and he offered a smile. "Would you like to talk a walk? Only, I saw you looking out the window before."

"I wouldn't say no," she answered truthfully, "the classroom gets awfully stuffy, even with the windows open."

"I could always have you moved to a nicer room," James offered as he gestured for Alicia to go outside first. "There are plenty to choose from, and it wouldn't take too much effort to have the furniture switched."

She felt a burst of gratefulness towards him, a smile spreading across her features. "That would be lovely," she answered, "but I couldn't ask that of you."

Outside, the weather was pleasantly warm. The worst of the heat was mellowed out by fluffy white clouds that floated lazily overhead, allowing just the barest trickle of warm sunshine to filter down. The gardens were bathed in soft golden light. From the treetops in the distance to the flowerbeds outside - everything seemed to sparkle in the sun.

James fell into step beside her; his long legs easily keeping up with her much shorter stature. He smiled down at her, his blue eyes soft and kind; it made Alicia's heart flip, and it only got worse when he said, "I'm so glad you're here."

Her own lips parted in a smile, laughter bubbling up in her throat-

"The children really need the influence of someone who isn't family, and you're perfect for the job."

Oh. Alicia shouldn't have been disappointed, yet she still felt a dull stir in her chest. Of course, that was what he meant; she shouldn't have been so silly as to believe anything else. He was her employer and a marquess, and she was deluded if she thought they could ever be friends.

Or anything more, because that's what you want, isn't it?

"Is everything all right?" James' voice had her jolting back to reality, but his kind smile never slipped. "I'm sorry that I asked you to walk with me - feel free to go back inside if you prefer."

A blush tinted her cheeks, and she shook her head. "I'm fine, my lord, really. Just... thinking."

"Oh. About what?"

They had wandered past the blooming rose gardens, along the path that led between the main house and the beautiful, ornate gazebo surrounded by flower beds. Now they wandered through a part of the garden that Alicia had never seen before. It was filled with beautiful purple lavender of every shade, the sweet, slightly husky smell

clinging to the air. It was so lovely that for a moment, Alicia stammered. "L-lots of things," she managed finally.

James only laughed. "Well, I imagine you have lots on your mind, given that you've just got here. If you need anything at all, don't hesitate to let me know."

Alicia had everything she could have ever wanted, right here. A wonderful new home, a meaningful job, people that needed her. And all right, perhaps it wasn't the life that she had imagined for herself - but so? All things considered, Alicia counted herself lucky to be here at all.

Eventually, they came to a wide, flat bench nestled between two beds of striking lavender. James sat, perched on the very edge as he patted the space beside her. "Don't worry," he said, "sit, please. There's no need to be so formal."

This didn't feel proper at all, but what did Alicia know about that? She was his employee and nothing more; it wasn't as if they could possibly have been up to anything. Besides, the lavender really *was* inviting, and she enjoyed his company. Finally, setting her worries aside, she settled down beside him, purposefully as far to the other end as physically possible.

James turned to stare out across the expanse of grass, stretching out his back so that it popped and cracked. "I know you're new here, and you haven't fully settled into our way of life yet," he said softly, "but I really *am* glad that you're here. You saved me when I really didn't see a way out; if not for you, I don't know where I'd be."

She smiled over at him, feeling her chest flutter against her ribs. Alicia had never been one to seek praise, exactly, but right then, she felt a flurry of gratefulness towards him. "I didn't do much," she replied, "I only answered an advert I saw. But if it helps, my lord, you saved me too."

Chapter Thirteen

A week passed without incident, and Alicia settled into a routine as if it had been years. It felt so natural to be here, as if she had never been anywhere else. She slotted into the children's lives as naturally as if she had always been their governess.

"Miss Alicia," Samuel said one morning as she was clearing away the little chalkboards they used for writing, "about what happened last week..."

She raised a brow curiously. "Lots of things happened last week, you'll have to be more specific, I'm afraid."

"Oh." He squinted up at her with a frown, blue eyes scanning her face. For the first time since she'd met him, he looked genuinely concerned. "I mean when I scared Miss Nora, with the toy rat I found..."

Now, he had her attention. Alicia forced a smile as she settled back into her seat, a hum of acknowledgment leaving her throat. "We've already spoken about this. It was a very rude thing to do, and you're lucky that Lord Arvill didn't catch you."

He nodded sullenly, a frown curling at his lips. "I know," he said softly, "I shouldn't have done it. I'm really sorry, Miss Alicia."

The apology struck a chord in her chest, made her heart ache. He was such a sweet boy, really, and it wasn't all his fault that he was acting this way. He had been through a lot, losing his father like he did, and so young, too. "Apology accepted, Samuel," she said brightly, "but you have to promise not to do such a thing again. All right?"

"All right," he agreed softly, "can I go play now?"

"Of course. Jenny is already in the playroom next door."

Samuel nodded, then turned to scurry off down the hall, his footsteps

echoing loudly off the wood.

Alicia watched him go with a soft smile, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. An apology was more than she expected, and she wasn't about to turn it down. Finishing with the chalkboards, she tucked them safely away in the desk for later before heading into the hall.

She was hoping to find James, but she found Edwin instead, hovering by the stairs as he glared at nothing in particular.

"Is everything all right, my lord?" Alicia asked gently. Although she kept a respectable distance between them, she had to resist the urge to creep closer. Why was he scowling like that?

When he turned, though, his face brightened. "Ah, Miss Sempill. How are you today?"

"Fine," she answered stiffly. Simply being in his presence made her feel awkward and strange, which was such a horrible contrast to how she felt around James and the little ones. "I was just wondering if you knew where your brother is?"

"Oh." His face fell again, lips curling. "He's downstairs in the drawing-room with Lady Bennington and her mother."

"Lady Bennington?" Alicia had never heard the name, nor had James ever mentioned having a lady over. Although she hated to admit it, it made her throat go dry.

Edwin hummed in response. "Agatha Bennington and her mother, Rose," he offered by way of explanation. "Agatha and James have been friends for as long as I can remember, but I've never liked the woman. She's the jealous type, you see, and can't stand that James has only ever seen her as a good friend."

Lips pursed, Alicia tried not to scowl. Her eyes drifted downstairs into the brightly lit foyer, but she couldn't see anyone except for the doorman as he wandered past the staircase.

"They'll be a while," Edwin offered sourly, "How about you and I take a walk through the gardens?"

She had done just the same with James the evening before, but she had no desire to walk with Edwin. She didn't say as much but simply declined with a tilt of her head. "I'm afraid that I have to check on the children"— she smiled— "Lord Arvill - the other Lord Arvill, that is - gave me strict instructions to keep an eye on them whenever possible."

Disappointment filled his expression, but he relented. "Another time, then."

Not if I can help it, Alicia thought, but she was wise enough not to say it aloud. Instead, she said her goodbyes and slipped into the playroom.

Samuel and Jenny were there; while Samuel sat on the little window seat and gazed out of the window, Jenny perched at the other end with a doll in her hands. They chatted softly but turned to smile when Alicia entered.

"You don't have to watch us *all the time*," Jenny insisted, "We promised not to play any more nasty pranks."

"I know," Alicia replied, "but I like spending time with you." She was sure that plenty of people might have found it strange that she chose to spend time with children, even when she didn't need to, but the truth was that it was lonely in this big old house, with so much room and not enough people to fill it. James was always busy, and Edwin made her spine tingle with discomfort. Considering that most of the maids and kitchen staff avoided her because she was governess and therefore of much higher standing, she didn't have many friends.

Oh, she realized with a sigh, *that does sound quite ridiculous, doesn't it? I need to get out more*. Perhaps she could go into town on Saturday or something.

"We like spending time with you, too," Samuel piped up, a grin taking over his features.

That, at least, made Alicia grin. "I'm glad."



In all truthfulness, James didn't want Agatha to be here. No, that wasn't quite true - he *loved* Agatha's presence and always enjoyed her

visits. It was her mother, Lady Rose, that was the problem. She had a horrible habit of taking over the conversation, interrupting mid-sentence with input of her own. Half the time, it didn't even have anything to do with what had just been said.

Today was no different, and he was quickly growing tired.

"Isn't it so nice, the three of us together?" Rose chirped as she sipped her tea, "I do so love our little get-togethers, but I wish that we could do so more often. Don't you, Agatha?"

Agatha smiled into her cup. "Yes, mother," she agreed, "but you have to remember that James is a busy man, and he can't drop everything to accommodate us whenever we demand it."

"Of course, of course. I would never *dream* of such a thing; it's only that you two used to be so close."

Nose scrunched, James sank deeper into his seat. They were sat at the table by the window, open to let in the slight breeze. Agatha's blonde hair floated gently in the breeze, drifting across her shoulders in a few loose strands. The rest was piled atop her head in an intricately braided sort of bun, and he had to admit that she looked lovely. She *always* did, dressing her best even for such simple afternoon visits. James had never understood it.

That's not true, he reminded himself. *You do know why. Everyone does.* It was no secret that Agatha was sweet on him. That she had always hoped they would end up together someday. It would have been sweeter had her mother not been so insistent that they were made for each other. That really took it from innocently endearing to somewhat *creepy*, although he never said so out loud.

"Now," Rose said with a bright smile, "it's a lovely day, and I do so love the gardens. Perhaps we could take a walk?"

James was in no mood. "I'm terribly sorry," he said with false cheer, "but I have work to be getting back to. The back wall of the manor requires some repairs, and I'm having difficulty finding the right hire to-"

"Say no more, I have just the man in mind," Rose cut in, "I shall send a letter with the details the second I get home. Now, Agatha, let's not

keep him waiting any longer."

Agatha rolled her eyes but complied. Her smile was bright and cheerful if a little regretful that they had to leave so soon. "It was lovely seeing you again," she offered kindly, "Mother is right, you know. We should try to see each other more often." Then she stood, brushing invisible crumbs from her dress, and made her way to the door.

James followed dutifully, although, of course, they knew the way out by now. He called for the doorman to see them out, then turned back to Agatha with a gentle smile. "I do miss you, Agatha. It was so much easier when we were young. Before..." he swept a hand across the foyer absently. "Everything."

"I know," she breathed, a sad smile on her lips. "I'm sorry about your father, James. He was a good man."

James only hummed in response. Father's death was only part of the reason he hardly saw Agatha nowadays; between caring for the manor, looking after the children, and everything else... well, there was hardly any time to think of anything else. Even now, with Alicia taking care of his siblings, there wasn't enough time in the world. Now that everyone thought he was a murderer, there was no enjoyment in leaving the house, anyway.

As if sensing his thoughts, Agatha patted his shoulder reassuringly. "Things will get easier," she assured, "I know they will." Then she stepped back as the doorman, Archie, arrived. "I'll see you soon, James," she offered kindly, "perhaps I could stop by again next week for tea? Or we could even picnic in the gardens, weather permitting."

It *did* sound better than moping around in the house all day. Smiling, he accepted. "I'd enjoy that. Now get home safe, both of you."

Agatha nodded in return, meanwhile Rose offered another of her beaming smiles. "Good day, James. Take care! My Agatha and I will organize another visit soon."

Archie sent him a sympathetic look as the two women left, although he didn't utter a word. He was a good employee; good at his job, with just enough kindness to be interested in James' wellbeing, while still respectful enough not to pry. "It seems that you've had quite the

eventful day," he offered gently, "Will the maids be clearing the drawing-room now?"

He hummed in response. "Yes, I think so. I should really get back to work, but I'd like to check on the children first."

Archie nodded, his smile fatherly and gentle. "I'll be here if you need me."

The upstairs was quiet; a few of the maids scuttled past, nodding their respects, but they were as soundless as ghosts on the hardwood floor. The only sound came from the children's playroom, where soft laughter filtered out into the hallway.

When James peered in, he saw both siblings by the window staring out into the gardens. The window was huge and almost reached the ceiling. There was a heavy wooden seat built into it. Somehow, they had both squeezed into the space, knees pressed together. Alicia sat on a chair beside them, pulled from the table in the corner, as she held one of Jenny's many cloth dolls on her lap.

"I'm not interrupting anything, am I?"

Alicia turned, her eyes widening. They were a stunning shade of bright, clear green - almost like grass, but so much more lovely. It really was amazing, how he had never noticed before. With the light filtering through the window and her dark hair spilling around her shoulders, the bright green of her eyes was more striking than he'd ever seen.

"Why is your hair down?" was the first thing that spilled from his lips, although he hadn't even meant it.

Blushing gently, Alicia glanced down at her own dark locks. She was pretty when she blushed, he thought, although the embarrassment that flooded her features made him wince in guilt. "I was teaching Jenny how to braid hair," she replied softly, "although I'm not much good myself."

"It's true," Jenny confirmed with a laugh, "but she's trying, so it's okay."

Alicia laughed and nudged Jenny's shoulder gently, and the two

shared a grin. It was sweet, how easily she had fit into their lives. For a few years, James had a governess of his own; he had been a polite child, one who avoided trouble, and yet still the governess had treated him harshly. He had assumed that was the standard - but she was slowly showing him that wasn't the case at all. She was their friend as well as their teacher. James felt warmth in his chest at the thought.

"My lord?" she asked quietly, "are you all right?"

He blinked back to attention, and three sets of eyes watched him curiously. "Just fine," he answered with a smile, "if you wouldn't mind, I'd like to borrow Miss Sempill for a moment."

She turned to look at him with wide, nervous eyes. "Have I done something wrong?"

"Not at all. Actually, quite the opposite." He smiled reassuringly, hoping that he hadn't frightened her too terribly. "I'd just like to know how you and the children are doing. Any progress with their reading?" She had been here for a few weeks now, but she *had* upturned her entire life for him and his family. The least James could do in return was make sure Alicia was comfortable.

She smiled kindly and stood, stretching out her legs as if she had been sitting for a while. "They're doing great. You'll be all right on your own for a minute, won't you Jenny? Samuel?"

They nodded in reply, smiles bright, and Alicia left them to it.

James and Alicia wandered downstairs in companionable silence, although he practically *felt* her nerves as if by some psychic presence radiating from Alicia's body. She held herself unusually stiffly as if expecting some kind of repercussions for... well, nothing. Or perhaps he simply made her nervous. Not that he could blame her; whether she believed the rumors of his father's murder or not, it wasn't as if she didn't know the things that people said about him.

After a moment, he shook those thoughts away. They did no good to anybody, least of all him. They slipped into his office, where James took a seat behind the desk and Alicia awkwardly perched on the edge of the chair at the other side.

"There's no need to be nervous," he said kindly, "I really do just want

to talk."

She relaxed, just enough to sit properly. At least she no longer looked ready to flee at any second, although her strained smile remained. Did she really find him that unbearable to be around? No, that wasn't it; hadn't they enjoyed a perfectly nice walk not so long ago?

Still, James forced his voice to be gentle as he said, "How are you finding things? I hope Samuel isn't up to his old tricks? I swear, he never used to be so disobedient."

"Oh"—her gaze flickered up to him, bright green meeting sea blue—"forgive me if I speak out of turn, my lord, but I believe that the children are simply trying to, uh, *cope*. Perhaps it's Samuel's way of dealing with the changes in his life."

Truthfully, it did seem like the most likely scenario. He simply wished that they wouldn't act up so. Although since Alicia's arrival, they had been so much better. Well behaved, polite, and they truly seemed to love her. "I think," he said kindly, "that you've been wonderful for the children. For the whole house, in fact. I didn't just want to ask you about the children, though. How has Edwin been treating you?"

Alicia bolted straighter in her seat, eyes snapping wide. "My lord?"

Perhaps that was the wrong way to go about it. He let out a sigh, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers, and tried again. "What I mean is, Edwin has a habit of putting people on edge. He does it on purpose, I think. Sometimes, at least. I'm only trying to make sure that he isn't doing anything to make you uncomfortable; this is your home too, now."

She seemed to deliberate, not that James blamed her. Not at all. Although he had asked her a genuine question, it was about his brother. Another lord, and an important man. Poor Alicia was probably wondering how much she could say before getting fired, although of course, he'd never entertain the idea.

"I think he has eyes for me, my lord, if you catch my meaning. Perhaps he's like this with all the women he knows, but he's been awfully friendly." A pause, in which Alicia let out a small sigh. "He asked me to walk with him the other day."

James felt his cheeks flush, for hadn't he asked the very same thing? He had simply wanted to enjoy the sunshine, but perhaps he should have been more careful. After all, Alicia was his employee, and he didn't want to overstep the boundaries.

As if sensing his surprise, Alicia waved a hand in a quick dismissal. "I did not mind when you asked, my lord, because I knew that you meant well. You were simply checking on me, of course." She smiled brightly, "but with Lord Arvill, it felt different. Strange."

Biting down on his lip, James sighed. "I'll have to have another talk with him, it seems. For now, don't feel bad if you choose to ignore him."

She offered just the barest hint of a smile. "I wouldn't dare avoid him, my lord, but I'll be sure not to speak to him too much. I'm so busy these days, I don't have the chance to talk much anyway."

He returned her smile, butterflies lighting up his stomach. Why, he couldn't place, but there was just something about her wonderful smile that made his chest warm. "Good. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?"

"Not that I can think of."

"Then I won't take up any more of your time."

Alicia took that as her cue to go, hopping to her feet and turning to the door. "Thank you, my lord," she breathed, "I appreciate you taking so much concern in my wellbeing." Then she vanished into the hall, the door slipping closed after her.

James tried not to think too deeply about why he suddenly felt so lonely or why he missed the sound of her bright, gentle voice even though she had only just left.

That was the moment that James knew he was in trouble.

Chapter Fourteen

James hovered awkwardly as he waited for Agatha to arrive. She was due any minute, but she couldn't keep time if her life depended on it, and so really, she could be half an hour or more yet. As someone who prided himself on timekeeping, James sometimes had to wonder how they had managed to stay friends for all these years.

"You should take a seat, my lord," Archie said softly, "and I'll inform you when Lady Agatha arrives."

Yet he crunched his features, letting out a sigh. "I'll wait here, thank you, Archie."

Why was he so nervous, anyway? They used to play in this foyer as children, under strict supervision, of course. They used to laugh and chat like it was nothing, simply enjoying one another's company. When had things changed to this tense, awkward excuse for friendship that they knew now?

It all happened when father died, James reminded himself. Agatha is the only one who believes it wasn't you, but even she isn't immune to the suspicion and lies.

A deep, resounding knock jolted James from his thoughts, and his gaze snapped to the door with a frown. "That will be them," he announced to nobody in particular, "please, send them in. I'll wait in the drawing room." Without waiting on Archie to reply, James turned and strode into the drawing-room.

It was colder today, and so the windows were closed. A fire blazed in the fireplace, sending bright, warm light dancing across the intricately patterned wallpaper. When James sat at the table, the flame's shadows continued to curl across his skin.

"James, how lovely to see you!" A shrill voice exclaimed from the doorway. Of course, they needed a chaperone; and who other than

Agatha's mother as always?

James turned, forcing a smile, and gestured for them both to sit. "It's always a pleasure, Rose. How are you, Agatha?"

She smiled, her dainty lips parting to reveal perfect teeth. "Much better now that I'm here," she answered sweetly, "You know I always feel better when we're together." She squeezed his shoulder as she passed, then perched delicately on the chair directly across from him.

Ah, so it was going to be one of *those* days. The days where Agatha took it upon herself to flirt, and James studiously ignored her the entire time. She never did learn, and while it had been something sweet at first, now it was simply something he put up with. It seemed to be some kind of game for Agatha, though.

"I was thinking last night," she continued, "that we should go out sometime. Remember when we used to frequent that sweet cafe in town. Oh, what was it called...?"

"Lou's?" Rose offered, "You two used to love their coffee and cream cakes. Even the cooks here can't compare."

Agatha's eyes lit up. "Exactly, that's the place. Oh, I miss their pastries and scones. Please, let's go together sometime."

James didn't know how to tell her that he didn't want to. Not without making it sound as if it was because of Agatha - when in reality, he simply didn't take any joy in outings anymore. Although he had never been *social*, to begin with, he had at least been able to enjoy taking trips into town or attending balls. Now, he despised the thought.

Agatha's features crinkled, and she let out a sigh. "No, how silly; I can't expect that of you." Her expression turned sympathetic, eyes somber. "How about a walk in the gardens, then? We could go right now." She didn't wait for an answer – otherwise, she might have noticed how James frowned. She was on her feet in a moment- linking her arm through his - almost dragging him towards the door.

Archie was there, the doors dutifully open as if he expected this to happen. He smiled as the two spilled out onto the front steps. "Enjoy your walk, Lady Agatha. Lord Arvill."

Rose towed along behind them, chattering on about one thing or the other. How well the flowers were doing and how pristine the path was.

James was no longer listening though because by then he had already spotted Alicia sitting by the far wall, her nose in a book. Dark hair spilled over her shoulder, having come loose from its bun, and she tucked a strand absently behind her ear.

"Don't you just love how beautiful this place is in summer?" Agatha asked, "Remember when we used to play here as children? And oh, the rose gardens are just the same! Although I see you've added more benches than I remember."

"Yes..." James replied although half of the conversation had completely missed his brain. "Could you excuse me for a moment, please? I just want to make sure that Miss Sempill is all right."

"Miss Sempill?"

James flushed, embarrassment sweeping over him. Of course, they didn't even know who she was! "My new governess, for Samuel and Jenny," he explained with a smile, "She's excellent with the children, and they both love her."

Agatha hummed. "You should introduce us."

"Of course," he replied simply. He wasn't sure why Agatha was so determined to meet Alicia, but he wasn't going to complain. With a smile, he ushered everyone over to where Alicia sat.

She looked up. "Oh, Lord Arvill. Can I help you?"

"I'd like to introduce you to some friends of mine," he replied gently. "This is Lady Agatha Bennington and Lady Rose Bennington."

Her eyes widened as she snapped the book closed. Then Alicia was on her feet, an apologetic smile on her features. "My lady," she inclined her head, first to Rose, then to Agatha, "I didn't know we were expecting visitors. If I had, I would have stayed out of your way. Apologies."

Agatha smiled - but it wasn't a nice one. Her lips curled inward, and her eyes went cold. "No need to worry," she said shrilly, "I'm sure James lets you wander wherever you want." Her eyes narrowed a little, and her shoulders straightened. "He never mentioned a new governess, though. How odd."

James winced. It was true that he hadn't spoken about Alicia, but he had never mentioned Agatha to Alicia, either. Was that why Agatha was acting so odd? "Alicia has only been here for a while," he replied simply, "I didn't want to overload her."

"Alicia, is it?"

James blinked, realizing his mistake a little too late. Not *Miss Sempill*, but Alicia. He had always thought of her by her first name, but until now, he hadn't said it out loud. Cheeks flushing a gentle pink, James cleared his throat and corrected, "*Miss Sempill* is new to the manor, and I wanted her transition to be easy. Comfortable."

"Ah." Agatha's features relaxed, and she wrapped her slender arm around James' with a sly smile. Their arms fit perfectly together, but her grip was vice-like, nails digging into the flesh of James' forearm. "Isn't James just so *considerate*? We really don't deserve to know such a wonderful man. I see he's treating you well, then?"

"Oh, exceptionally."

"Exceptionally, hmm?" Agatha's eyes narrowed again - and now even her mother, usually so casual towards Agatha's antics, looked uncomfortable. "Well," she continued coolly, "don't get too comfortable. You're only a governess, after all."

That was it. James had had *enough* of this nonsense. He tugged his arm from Agatha's with enough force to send them both stumbling, then whirled to her with a scowl. "Agatha, I have to insist that you treat Miss Sempill with more respect than that. She's a welcome addition to our household, and I won't have you treating her like this."

Agatha huffed, arms folded across her face. "James, you don't understand-

"No, I understand perfectly. Please, I think it's time you left." This coldness. This *jealousy*. James wanted none of this in his house, not

even if it came from his dearest friend. Friendship was no excuse to forget boundaries or act cruelly towards others. Arms folded, he gestured down the long road. "Your carriage will still be waiting, I presume."

Agatha flushed. "I'm sorry, but-"

"Agatha dear, we've overstayed our welcome." If Rose was agreeing with him, then Agatha was really out of line. She tugged on Agatha's sleeve and began towing her down the driveway, where their speck of a carriage still waited in the distance. "We'll visit another day," she added with a strained smile.

"I am so sorry," James let out in a rush, turning an apologetic smile to Alicia. "If I knew she would react like that, I wouldn't have introduced you."

Alicia only offered a nervous little shrug, her eyes downcast. She dropped heavily back into her seat, taking the book into her hands to clutch it between slender fingers. "I'm sure she had her reasons," she replied.

Reasons being jealousy, perhaps. It had been a silly idea to introduce them. Agatha was perfectly nice until she thought other women were getting too close to James, then she turned into a whole different person. She wasn't cruel, not really; she just... didn't have a good grasp of her own emotions. She was a bit like Edwin, in that respect.

When James sat, carefully at the opposite side of the bench to Alicia, he turned to face her again. "I really can't apologize enough; I've always tried to emphasize the fact that my staff are treated fairly by visitors. I feel I failed on that account today."

She offered a smile, and it came a little more genuinely than James expected. "She's in love with you," she replied, "Love makes people do strange things."

James couldn't even deny it because he knew it was true. Since they were children, he had always known how Agatha felt. She wore her emotions so obviously, and it was both sweet and infuriating all at once. Still, it was no excuse for what Agatha had said. *Just a governess*, but Alicia was so much more than that.

She shifted then, resting the book on her knee, and finally prying it out of her stiff fingers. "How did you two become friends, my lord?" she asked quietly, "I've never heard you mention her before."

Given that Agatha was his only real friend, he supposed that he should have mentioned her before now. "Our mothers were good friends, many years ago. Our families have been a part of the same social circle for a very long time, and Lady Rose hosts a ball at the start of every Season that my whole family attends. Well, with father gone and Edwin always away, it's only me now." He shrugged, forcing a smile onto his lips. "Regardless, we've known each other since we were little, and Agatha was the only one who stuck by me when... well, I'm sure you've heard."

"Heard what?" Alicia questioned, turning those big green eyes to him. Was she feigning naivety, or did she truly not know what he meant? The latter, he realized a second later, when she grimaced.

He answered anyway. "People seem to think that I murdered my own father to take his position as marquess. As the older brother, the title automatically went to me when he passed." The words stuck in his throat, but James forced himself to continue. "He had an accident on the stairs; fell down the entire flight before anyone got to him. But it was an *accident*, as I said. I would never try to hurt my family."

James hadn't realized he was fighting back tears until Alicia brushed a hand across his cheek. She drew back almost immediately, head bowed in apology - but James felt himself smile.

"If it counts for anything," she said quietly, "Agatha isn't the only one who believes your side."

James blinked, brows furrowed. He must have heard wrong because it almost sounded like she said...

"I believe you too, my lord. I haven't known you for long, but I know that a man as kind and generous as yourself could never kill *anyone*, least of all a member of your own family." She took a breath, turning her wide gaze to him, and offered a smile. "Even if I'm only one of two people in the whole world to believe you, I stick by that; I know you didn't hurt your father."

James only gaped, feeling warmth bloom in his chest at her

admission. Just like that, James felt a new burst of admiration for Alicia; and he knew, without a doubt, that Agatha was wrong. Alicia was *so much more* than just a governess; she was the woman that saved him.

Chapter Fifteen

As Alicia and James parted ways, she had to admit how he stayed in her mind for a long time after. Perhaps she had imagined it, but as she sat in the gardens staring out at the topiary, she felt as if something had passed between them, then. There was a little flicker of *something* deep inside her chest, something she couldn't quite place but left a warmth in her chest, nonetheless.

But what of it? James was a marquess, her employer no less, and harboring these feelings for him was unhealthy. Shaking her head, Alicia hauled herself upright and brushed down her skirts, then grabbed the book from its spot beside her.

At least Lady Bennington is gone, she thought sourly, only to feel a flash of guilt at the thought. It was true that she had been less than kind, but perhaps Alicia had simply caught her on a bad day. *Do you really think that?* Her mind betrayed, but she shook her head once again to cast out those unhelpful thoughts.

Inside, Alicia ducked into the library to replace the book, roaming the aisles of tall, looming bookcases until she found the right spot. There were so many books that it was simply *impossible* to even fathom reading them all. There were quite a few educational books - a whole section on engineering, for instance - that were completely beyond Alicia's comprehension.

"We found you!" a voice chirped, and Alicia turned to see Samuel racing down one of the aisles with a beaming grin on his face.

"Samuel!" Alicia called, immediately reaching out to catch him before he could do something silly and get hurt. "No running in the library, *please*." Heart thudding against her ribs, she deposited him on the nearest chair - a plush armchair facing the window.

A moment later, Jenny appeared; and Alicia's heart rate calmed when she came skipping over at a more reasonable pace. "We saw you with

James and Lady Bennington," she said cheerfully, "They're *best* friends, but Lady Bennington is in love with him!"

Alicia groaned. She did *not* want to be having this conversation with two young children. "Jenny," she chimed, "it isn't nice to speculate about your brother's friendships." Except, hadn't she done the very same thing not so long ago? It was quite clear to her that Lady Bennington was in love.

She tried not to think too hard about why that thought made her stomach twist.

Jenny strode over, arms folded, and dropped into the armchair opposite Samuel. She stared out of the window for a moment, but her gaze eventually turned back to Alicia. "Before you came here," she said matter of factly, "we had a lot of spare time, and watching the people James invited over is *fun*."

"Besides," Samuel cut in, "she's right. Lady Bennington is in love with him, and he knows it, too."

The sensible thing to do would have been to put a stop to this silly chatter. It was none of her business, and she certainly didn't need to hear about any kind of drama from children. Yet... she was curious. It left an odd ache in her chest to know that someone else had feelings for James Arvill, but at the same time, she felt the impossible tug of curiosity drawing her in.

Samuel grinned as if he saw the spark of interest in her eyes and wanted to play along. He shifted in the too-big armchair, legs crossed with one foot dangling off the edge. "Lady Bennington is the only person who thinks James is innocent. He doesn't know we know about the rumors, but we know how to *listen*."

"But that isn't the point," Jenny cut in, "the point is that Lady Bennington's mama wants them to court, and she's been trying for *years*, but James has turned her down at every attempt."

"Because he's not interested in romance," Samuel added.

Not interested in romance? Alicia quirked a brow. Her chest was heavy with disappointment, but what did she expect? Anyway, she had barely been here a handful of months, and she shouldn't be

invading Lord Arvill's personal information like this-

"Everything all right in here?"

Alicia jumped, a small squeak leaving her lips as she spun to face the source of the voice. She was met with a pair of dark blue eyes, watching her with barely concealed amusement. "Lord Arvill," she stuttered - but it was Edwin, not James. She wasn't entirely sure if that was better. "I didn't realize you were here."

His lips parted into an easy smile, and he seemed to brighten. "I was just looking for something to occupy the time. A new book. Do you have any suggestions?" He wandered to the bookcase beside her, staring up at the rows and rows of options. He was so close, in fact, that Alicia could smell the cologne on his skin.

She stepped away, hands falling to her side. It was rude, she knew, but the curling discomfort that rose in her stomach at his arrival couldn't be ignored. "The children and I were just chatting," she said idly, "but I think it's about time that I got back to work. I have, uh, tests to mark." She hadn't actually given the children any tests because most of her teaching was done orally... but he didn't need to know that.

Edwin looked at her from the corner of his eyes, brows raised. "And here I thought we could sit and have a nice conversation over literature."

"Sorry to disappoint," Alicia lied, "but I really *am* busy."

"Shame."

Alicia couldn't help but wince, quietly sliding out of the library and into the hall. It wasn't that she disliked Edwin Arvill, per se, but every encounter with him left her feeling decidedly... *uncomfortable*.

Yet it wasn't Edwin that lingered on her mind long after she had left, but James.



If there was one thing that James detested, it was guilt. It curled deep in his gut and made a home there, curling around his organs and

squeezing so tightly that he couldn't even breathe. It had been plaguing him for a day now, and although he had considered writing to Agatha to ask for an apology, he couldn't quite bring himself to put pen to paper.

His relationship with Agatha had been turbulent over the years. Not so much because of her, but because of the feelings he knew she harbored for him. Given that James had never felt the same, their friendship had been rocky since he discovered that Agatha Bennington, his best friend since childhood, was in love with him.

In hindsight, it had probably been evident for years, and he simply hadn't noticed until recently.

With a low groan, James heaved himself upright and wandered into the hall. There were over seventy rooms in this house - Edwin claimed it was closer to a hundred - but James had never bothered to count. Most of the rooms now were closed off, collecting dust, but he always knew where to find Alicia. There were only three places she could be found on an afternoon like this: teaching the children in the classroom, watching them in the playroom, or outside in the gardens by the side of the house.

Since it was such a beautiful day and lessons were over, he made the quick decision to wander to the front of the house, slipping through the great double doors and into the sunshine.

Big, white clouds floated lazily overhead; the sun peeked out from behind them, casting modest rays of golden sunshine across the expanse of land around him. Everywhere the light touched, it brought life to the beautiful garden. Perfect green grass seemed to *glow*, and the flowerbeds bursting with life seemed even more lovely in the afternoon sun. James found himself wishing he had more free time to admire the gardens, and everything that came with them. Since Alicia had arrived at the manor, he *did* make more of an effort to spend time outside.

He found the woman in question a few minutes later. Just like last time, she was perched on a thin wooden bench with a book in her lap - a different one this time, although he couldn't read the title from here. She had her head tilted back to enjoy the warmth, eyes closed.

It felt wrong, somehow, to interrupt her during such a moment. It felt

private, just a woman enjoying the good weather, without worrying who saw. Yet before James could slink away and pretend he was never there, Alicia's eyes cracked open, and she offered him a shy smile. "Good afternoon, my lord. Enjoying the sun?"

Not nearly as much as she had been, but he kept that to himself. Instead, he wandered closer and replied, "Yes. Days like these aren't so common, so I'm enjoying it while I can."

She smiled widely, and it was a beautiful expression that made her entire face light up with easy delight. James had never noticed before, but she had a little dimple in her left cheek that gave her a sweet, innocent sort of look. The asymmetrical appearance of having a dimple on only one side was charming as anything.

"I often see you out here alone," he mused quietly, "Do you not get lonely?"

"I'm with the children all afternoon, and I've become rather attached to Nora, the young maid. Sometimes it's good to have some time alone."

As someone who spent most of his days alone, cooped up in his study, perhaps it was simply that they had a different perspective of what *alone* meant.

"But something tells me that wasn't why you sought me out?" she added, brows quirked in question. "Would you like to tell me what's on your mind, my lord?"

My lord. Of course, Alicia had always called him by his proper title, addressed him how staff were expected to. Yet he found himself wishing, just once, that she would call him James. Shaking his head, he wandered closer and perched awkwardly on the bench opposite her. There was just enough space between them to be proper, each bench bordering the little path, but it felt too close. Too intimate.

Alicia didn't speak. Instead, she softly closed her book and set it aside before leaning her elbows on her knees. She seemed to be waiting for him to speak, patient and unwilling to urge him on.

"I've been thinking more about what happened with Agatha on Thursday," he said after a moment, "and how unfair it was to you that

she said those things. I can't pretend to understand *why* she said those things at all - it's so unlike her." Well, that wasn't true. Hadn't Alicia said it was of Agatha's love for him, that she was jealous of his attention to other women? It was true that James hadn't spent much time around other women, certainly none like Alicia. Perhaps it made sense that Alicia felt threatened... but even so, it wasn't as if anything could ever happen between himself and Alicia.

Surely, Agatha saw that?

Biting down on his lip, James forced himself to focus. "I simply want her to know that her actions were uncalled for - but I don't wish to make you uncomfortable. I suppose... I suppose I'm asking for your permission to confront her because I don't wish to make you feel as if any of this is your fault."

She blinked up at him with wide, bright eyes. Her thick, dark eyelashes cast shadows across her cheeks, only emphasized by the way the sun shone directly above her. She was radiant, and she didn't even seem to realize just how beautiful she was. Eventually, Alicia let out a sigh and tilted her head to the sky. "It isn't my choice to make, my lord. Truthfully, it *was* uncomfortable, but, well, she's a lady, and I'm just a governess. It isn't as if I could have said anything in my defense."

James winced; he couldn't help it, features scrunching before he had the chance to stop himself. Agatha *was* a lady, yes, and Alicia was a governess; but that didn't mean she had the right to mistreat Alicia that way. With a little stutter in his chest, though, James understood. Alicia couldn't have said anything for fear of stepping out of line, for fear of retaliation.

"Not that I'm trying to put the blame on Agatha," Alicia added after a moment. Her cheeks had flushed a beautiful pink, embarrassment flooding her petite face. "I don't want her to get into trouble, of course, and it really is no issue-"

"Of course it is," James cut in. Without thinking, he shuffled forward on the bench to reach out and place a warm hand over hers. He had really blurred the lines now between what was acceptable and what wasn't, but even so, he didn't draw his hands away. "You deserve to be angry, and if you are, I don't blame you. What Agatha did was uncalled for, and I know we've discussed it before, but I want

everyone under my employ to be treated fairly and kindly." It was more than that, but James managed to hold his tongue. Softer now, he added, "Regardless of that, *you* deserve to be treated fairly and kindly."

If she hadn't been pink already, now Alicia was positively *scarlet*. She ducked her head, nervous laughter escaping her lips, and just when James thought he had crossed the line, she turned to him with a beautiful, beaming smile. "Thank you, my lord. I don't wish you to fall out over this because I know she is a dear friend. Perhaps, in the future, I'll make myself scarce when Lady Bennington is around."

She shouldn't have to, but James felt a pang of sympathy, and he understood. He gave her hand a long, gentle squeeze before retracting his arm back to his side.

He didn't miss how Alicia seemed to deflate at the lack of contact as if his hand on hers was the only thing keeping her afloat. She continued smiling, though, and it really was a lovely sight.

"So, shall I write to her, then? I promise to keep your involvement to a minimum, but I do hope that I can get to the bottom of all of this."

Alicia nodded; a quick bounce of her head causing curls to flutter about her shoulders. They rustled in the breeze, but her hair was so thick that the curls hardly moved unless she did, no matter how windy. He thought they were natural too; not the artificial curls created by knotted rags and warm water as was the fashion these days. He couldn't imagine wanting to spend so much time on hair alone, but Alicia didn't need to anyway.

Shaking his head, James tried to dispel those thoughts. He shouldn't have been wondering about Alicia's hair, or any part of her for that matter. Now it was *his* turn to flush a gentle pink, and he quickly climbed to his feet in one jerky movement. "Now, I'm afraid I have a busy day, and I must be off. But... I *will* make sure that Agatha doesn't bother you again."

She smiled up at him, still perched in her seat, eyes wide and appreciative. "Thank you," she said after a moment, "it really does mean a lot to me that you care so much."

Of course, I care, he wanted to say, but he didn't, for fear that Alicia

might catch on to the feelings growing in his gut. Instead, he simply nodded. "Enjoy the rest of your afternoon, Alicia. I'll see you later."

He felt her gaze on his back, sensed her smiling at his retreating figure as he vanished back inside the manor. Strangely, he didn't hate it as he might have, had it been anyone else watching him so intently.

He glanced back once, only to see Alicia hurriedly drop her gaze and scramble for her book. Laughter bubbled in his throat at the sight. She really was too good for this place. Too good for *him*.

Chapter Sixteen

Agatha, James wrote, *I think we need to talk about what happened on Thursday. Please come to see me when you can, so we can discuss it properly.*

It had been a terribly formal thing to write, without the usual niceties one would send to a good friend. Mostly, James just wanted to get it over with. He knew that Agatha had been uncalled for, and he battled between not wanting to make it into a bigger deal than necessary, and desperately wanting to defend Alicia. So, this was his compromise; a quick face-to-face meeting with Agatha, where he would say what needed to be said. Hopefully, they could put this all behind them soon after.

Now, as he drifted through the halls while waiting for Agatha to appear, James saw the small figure of Alicia hovering by one of the living rooms. He wandered over, brows raised. "Is everything all right, Miss Sempill?"

She turned to stare up at him with enormous green eyes, a nervous smile on her face. "Fine, my lord," she answered simply, "the children have finished for the day. Is there anything I can do?"

James frowned, his own eyes narrowed as concern jolted his chest. Usually, she was good at taking her own initiative and doing whatever she thought was appropriate; what had changed today? "Nothing that I can think of," he replied kindly, "just enjoy the rest of your day."

She hummed idly, lips pursed. "Lady Agatha is coming over soon, isn't she?"

Ah. Was this the cause of her withdrawn nature? James had hoped to avoid mentioning it so that Alicia wouldn't have to deal with it. "She is," he answered carefully, "but we'll be in the drawing-room for most of that time. I plan to tell her exactly how I feel, but I don't want it to

get in the way of our friendship."

"Then you shouldn't say anything to her at all, my lord," she said stiffly. Her bright eyes had lost their spark. "I don't want to come between two old friends."

Agatha had done a good job of that herself. Letting out a sigh, James ran a hand through his thick hair. "This isn't your fault, Miss Sempill. Now, I'm afraid I have to be off - she should be arriving any minute."

Alicia only nodded, a small smile gracing her features. "Of course."

He didn't *want* to leave her side, in all honesty, but he managed to tear himself away from Alicia just as the grand doors slid open to reveal Agatha standing on the front steps. She was wearing the most beautiful green dress, one that was cut low across the bust and hugged her slender waist just so. Her pale blonde hair hung across her face in thick curls, the rest pinned up behind her head.

Considering that James was wearing only a white shirt and black dress trousers, she was considerably overdressed.

She swept in with a smile, cheeks flushed from the breeze outside. "James!" she announced with a smile, "I thought for a moment that you had forgotten about me."

Agatha was not easily forgotten, and she knew it. James rolled his eyes and offered a friendly smile as Agatha swept into his arms. "You've seen me more this month than you usually do in three," he replied, "that hardly constitutes being forgotten."

They wandered into the drawing-room together while Rose trailed behind. At least for once, she seemed subdued, perhaps because she knew her daughter was out of line. They all settled down by the blazing fire - Rose and Agatha on the settee and James on the armchair across.

"You said we needed to talk," Agatha said immediately, and her lips formed a frown, "I know what I said to that girl was rude, but I saw how she was looking at you."

James hadn't even poured tea yet - usually a maid's job, but he had insisted on privacy for this meeting. He watched her over the rim of

the teapot, brows raised. "And how exactly did Miss Sempill look at me?"

Agatha raised a hand, waving it idly as if it were somehow a decent replacement for words. "I don't know, but it wasn't the look that a professional should be giving her employer."

This was ridiculous. James might have said so if that wasn't bound to end in a fight. Over the years, he and Agatha had their spats - as all friends did - but this was the first time he was truly *annoyed* with her. "I think," he said slowly, choosing his words with careful thought, "that you're jealous."

"Jealous of the *governess*?"

It did sound ridiculous when put like that, James knew. He let out a sigh and instead turned to the tea tray, pouring a cup first for Rose and then Agatha. He was pouring the third cup for himself before anyone decided to speak.

"I agree with Agatha," Rose cut through the silence with her words, "there's something between the two of you. Or the potential for something. I certainly hope you don't have *feelings* for the staff."

Agatha scoffed, dark green eyes narrowed. "Don't be silly, Mother," she snapped. Reaching for the tea, her hands trembled when they took the saucer. "James would never stoop so low, would you?"

Admittedly, that wasn't something so easily answered. Flushed pink, James managed only a wavering smile. How *did* he feel about Alicia? Mostly he tried not to think about it too deeply.

"Anyway," Agatha grumbled, "I was only trying to put her in her place. I didn't mean to cause a stir."

"You were a little *dramatic*, dear," Rose replied softly, "but I think a whole meeting to discuss this is a bit much, James."

Maybe she was right. Even so, James had made a decision, and he was going to see it through. "I just wanted to... I don't know, find out why you felt the need to belittle Miss Sempill like that."

"I didn't *belittle*," Agatha snapped, "but she clearly has eyes for you, and I'm beginning to think you have eyes for her, too."

"Now, Agatha-

"You *know* I'm right," she snapped, cutting her mother off mid-sentence. She bit down on her lip and let out a sigh, eyes scrunched shut. "I just don't understand why you're so determined to keep us as friends, James. Can't you see that I'm better than some little governess you've only known for a handful of weeks?"

James' stomach turned, and he found himself gripping the teapot hard enough to make his knuckles ache. He hadn't even put the thing down yet, still holding it stupidly while Agatha continued.

"I'm sorry if you think I was out of line," she said stiffly, her whole body turning rigid, "but I can't understand *why* you would rather defend her than try to see my side of things."

"Agatha, please. Don't get yourself so worked up."

But Agatha wasn't listening now. She stood, eyes narrowed dangerously, and stormed from the room without another word. Her boots thumped heavily across the wooden floor, vanishing rapidly as she marched off.

Rose and James shared a look, wide-eyed and silent. It wasn't often that he and Rose ever agreed on anything, but he saw in her gaze then, that she was just as irritated. "She only wishes to be with you, you know," Rose said calmly, "you're the only man she's ever loved, and the only man she ever will."

"That doesn't mean that I have to give in to her fantasies."

"No, but it hurts her to see you fall for someone else." Then Rose stood, straightening her skirts and her shawl, before turning to amble off after her daughter.

Disappointment swam in James' chest. That... could have gone better. Much better. He had nobody to blame but himself, of course, for handling it so poorly, but that knowledge only made him feel even more rotten. With a sigh, he dragged a hand through his hair and reluctantly climbed to his feet.

Out in the foyer, the doors were closed. Archie hovered awkwardly by the entrance, lips pulled into a sympathetic grimace. "Lady Agatha asked to leave, and her mother agreed that it was time to go. I'm sorry, my lord."

"Don't be," James replied softly, "it isn't your fault that she's acting this way. What's gotten into her?" He mumbled the last part, more to himself than anyone else, but he was startled from his thoughts when Alicia appeared in the corner of his vision. When he turned, she was stood by the bottom step, arms folded.

"Have Lady Rose and Lady Agatha not arrived yet?"

"Been and gone, I'm afraid. It was a short visit indeed."

She padded closer, feet quiet on the wood as she came to a stop beside him. James noticed how she always kept just a little bit of distance between them. "How so, my lord?"

He winced. "Agatha seems to think that I'm being too harsh on her," he replied stiffly. He shouldn't really have been talking to her about this at all, but there was something soothing about Alicia's presence. "She left in a sour mood, but I suppose I can't blame her."

Alicia only blinked up at him, eyes questioning. Her gaze flickered to Archie, but he was already leaving the foyer, perhaps to give them privacy. "I don't mean to step out of line, my lord, but Lady Agatha seems to me like she takes things too personally."

She wasn't exactly wrong about that, truthfully. Even so, James felt the urge to defend Agatha. "She's my oldest friend and the only person to stick by me when I needed her," he replied, "she's a good person, and it isn't her fault that she's prone to jealousy." Neither of them had many friends to choose from; didn't it make sense for her to be protective of him?

Alicia bit down on her lip, a hum of agreement leaving her lips. She had beautifully full lips, too; the way she caught them between her teeth was mesmerizing. "Thank you for defending me - you've done it twice now, my lord. First against your brother and now your friend. But I have to wonder if perhaps Lady Agatha simply doesn't like me for reasons I can't control."

"She thinks we're too close," James blurted suddenly, "but that's absurd."

"Right," Alicia agreed, mumbling the words. "Completely ridiculous." Why did she look so downtrodden? It was as if she was the one being reprimanded, not Agatha. Then her gaze flickered up and she sighed. Her hands clenched nervously, and she didn't quite meet his eyes, but she murmured, "I must confess that I'm somewhat jealous, my lord, that Lady Agatha gets to spend so much time with you, even though you're always busy."

He could only blink in reply, rolling the words over and over in his mind. Had he heard Alicia correctly? It seemed impossible to think that she was jealous of Agatha, who she clearly disliked because she spent time with *him*. To begin with, the last few visits with Agatha had gone so terribly that he wasn't even sure what there was to be jealous of.

"I don't understand," he confessed eventually, heart beating against his ribs. "Perhaps you could explain for me?"

She winced, lips pursed. "It's... never mind, my lord. It isn't important." She offered a smile, but it hung awkwardly on her lips. "I should check on the children. I don't want them up to anything while I'm gone." Then she darted off back upstairs without looking back, vanishing into the hallway beyond.

James sucked in a breath, eyes squeezed closed, and tried to ignore the headache settling into the back of his head. *Jealousy*, he thought, *what a silly thing it is*.

Chapter Seventeen

It was a beautiful day; the sky was perfectly blue and dotted with fluffy white clouds, allowing warm, unfiltered sunshine to shine onto the gardens. Everything was bathed in soft light, and it poured through the windows so strongly that it made the pale wood floors of the manor almost blinding. It was lovely, though, and even better for the scorching heat that came with it. Weather like this was so rare, even in summer.

Alicia was going to make the best of it. Even if embarrassment lingered in the back of her mind, reminding her of her conversation with James not so long ago, she was determined to at least enjoy the sunshine.

"How about a picnic?" she asked the children that afternoon as they packed away their schoolwork. "A lovely picnic outside in the gardens, with all of our favorite food? I already asked the cook what you like to eat, and she said it can all be ready for three o'clock."

Jenny and Samuel positively *beamed* at each other as laughter spilled from their lips. She had never seen them so delighted, so eager, in all her time here.

"Will there be scones?" Jenny asked brightly, "and cakes and fresh fruit cut into little bite-sized pieces?"

Alicia couldn't help but grin. "There will be. Now, all I need you two to do is convince Lord Arvill to join us."

Jenny's lips curled, "Edwin too?"

As far as Alicia knew, Edwin was busy. Since he arrived, she had barely seen him at all; either he was avoiding her specifically, or the man was simply elusive by nature. "Not today," she answered, "it will be just the four of us."

"I know exactly how to get James to join us," Samuel piped up, his smile cheeky. He folded his arms and puffed out his chest. "If I tell him how much effort you've put into this, Miss Alicia, he won't be able to say no."

A flush covered her cheeks, and she looked away, trying to bite back a laugh. "That's kind of you to say. Now, please go find him, while I start preparing."

They were happy to dart off downstairs, calling for James as they ran. Alicia watched them go until they faded from sight, putting the last book back on its shelf, before following down after them.

The kitchen was an enormous space, counters lining every wall. There was a huge table right in the center, where the head cook stood kneading dough. There were two other cooks as well, both of whom were in the far corner packing a huge picnic basket with various goods.

"Ah," the cook, Elizabeth, exclaimed, "good of you to come. Just in time, too - the picnic is almost ready."

Alicia smiled. "Thank you, it was kind of you to do this so last minute."

Elizabeth was an older woman, perhaps forty or so, but despite the wrinkles beneath her eyes and the graying tint to her hair, there was a youthfulness about her in the way she smiled. "Any time, girl. Lord Arvill could do with a break. He works himself too hard sometimes, although it's not my place to say."

Alicia couldn't agree more. Hopefully, this was exactly what he needed to relax for a day. "Do you think he'll appreciate it?" she asked, nerves bubbling in her chest, "or will he find me a nuisance?"

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. She even paused her kneading to fix her gaze on Alicia with a soft smile. "I don't think Lord Arvill is capable of finding you a nuisance," she said, "he thinks the world of you, you know."

Alicia's heart stuttered. She could only gape, lips parted even though no words left her throat. She doubted that he really thought that much of her; after all, she was just a governess, and he was a lord.

"Now," Elizabeth announced, and she shooed the other two cooks away so she could grab the basket from their hands. "Everything is in here - I made sure to include everyone's favorites. Even yours. Enjoy yourself, do you hear me?"

Alicia only laughed as she took the basket, although it weighed so much that she had to strain to carry it properly. Slinging it over one shoulder, she had to grip the handle with her free hand to keep it from digging in. "Thank you. I mean it," she said softly.

"Just don't expect this to be a regular thing, mind you."

"I wouldn't dream of it." With a smile, Alicia turned to dart back into the foyer, basket in hand.

Samuel and Jenny were already there, hovering by the open door as they both hopped eagerly from foot to foot. Samuel had his hands clasped in front of him, practically vibrating with unshed energy. Jenny, meanwhile, simply bounced up and down and grinned when she caught sight of Alicia.

There was no James in sight, though, and Alicia's heart sank.

As if sensing her disappointment, Samuel pointed towards the study at the far end of the foyer. "He's just finishing up a letter, and then he'll be done," he announced proudly, "I told him you'd be so disappointed if he couldn't go, and Jenny said she wouldn't talk to him for a week."

Muffling a startled laugh behind her palm, she only stared. "I think that might have been a bit much, Jenny, love."

She only shrugged, then spun to dart out of the door and into the sunshine. "Maybe, but it worked!"

Alicia might have given them a scolding, had she not felt her chest flutter with joy. However, a moment later the door creaked open, and there stood none other than James Arvill himself. "Good afternoon," he said with a smile as he meandered over, "am I to believe that there's a picnic on the cards for today?"

"Indeed."

He seemed so genuinely happy to see her, and it made her chest giddy. He linked his arm through hers as they walked, basking in the sunshine, and even insisted on taking the heavy basket from her arms. For a while, they walked in peaceful silence as the two children darted off ahead.

Before she knew it, they were at the lavender gardens again, the beautiful scent filling Alicia's senses. James led her to a little alcove between the wall of the manor and a collection of beautiful, young evergreen trees.

"Why not sit here?" he offered, "It's a beautiful view."

He was right, of course. From here, the entire lavender garden was visible; the flowerbeds were bursting with life, every shade of purple imaginable spread out across every available inch of space. Seats and various other greenery dotted through the gardens, but here was the only spot with any true privacy, the trees keeping them from sight.

"It's beautiful."

"This is my favorite spot," Jenny announced as she stared out across the garden. "I like to pick lavender and put it under my pillows. Edwin says it helps people sleep."

"You're supposed to dry it first, silly," Samuel cut in with a laugh, "but who cares about flowers when there's food."

Alicia couldn't disagree, so she took the basket from James' hands and laid out the blanket across the grass. It was a lovely, checked pattern of purple and white, matching the lavender around them almost perfectly. Had Elizabeth done that on purpose, or was it simply a nice coincidence?

Soon enough, they were all settled on the blanket. James and Alicia across from each other with the children in between. Alicia flipped back the lid to reveal the food, perfect sandwiches with salmon and cucumber and cured ham. Fresh fruit with cream. Rosy, red apples and peeled oranges. A thick quiche with bacon and cheese, already sliced for easy eating. There were flasks too - orange juice for the children and tea for the adults. Then, for dessert, a stunning collection of little macaroons and delicate little pastries.

"Oh," Jenny gasped, clapping a hand over her lips, "my favorite!"

"Eat a proper meal first, please," Alicia chided, "then sweets."

Jenny grumbled, but she did reach for a cucumber sandwich and took a dainty bite. Her eyes lit up, and before long she was reaching for another one.

"We should join, before Jenny here inhales everything herself," James said with a laugh.

And so they did. There was *more* than enough to go around; Alicia found little cups and plates so everyone could help themselves, and they were all quick to take a sandwich and pour drinks from the flasks. The tea stayed remarkably hot, and Alicia felt her tongue burn when she took an enthusiastic sip.

"Careful," James warned, gently taking the cup from Alicia's grasp. "Don't hurt my favorite governess."

It was an offhand remark. Silly, really, clearly meant to tease; but Alicia's stomach flipped at his words. She felt her cheeks flush pink and hoped that it was warm enough to blame the weather. "I'm all right," she replied, "I just got a bit too excited, I think."

"I had tea once," Samuel said with a serious look in his eyes. "I burnt my tongue too, and nobody's let me try it again since."

Alicia couldn't help but grin. When she reached to take her cup again, James' hand was still lingering there, and they brushed fingertips. Just for a moment, Alicia froze. His skin was warm, she knew even just from that gentle touch. Warm, strong, and unblemished, softer than she imagined.

James quickly snapped his hand away, and the moment shattered. He smiled, though, and there was a pretty flush of his own dusting his tanned cheeks.

Lifting the cup, Alicia took a long drink and avoided his gaze.

"We used to have picnics with father sometimes," Jenny said after a moment. She had picked another sandwich from the pile, this one

salmon and salad, and munched away happily as she spoke. "We always had leftovers though, so we had them the next day, too, while sitting in the drawing room like it was some fancy social gathering."

"I used to do the same with mother," James replied softly, "Of course, that was a long time ago."

"My family and I never really had *picnics*," Alicia said, "Papa was a busy man so it was mostly just Mama and me. There was this *wonderful* little café that we used to go to, though. It had the most delicious pastries, and I remember this one strawberry tart that was bigger than my entire hand. I wonder if it's still there..." Alicia's eyes narrowed thoughtfully. She could still picture it, the elegant stone exterior, and the bright blue wallpaper inside. It had such a friendly atmosphere, and Alicia had always looked forward to visits.

When she snapped back to attention, she saw the frown on James' face. "Used to go to?" he asked after a beat of silence.

Well, once Mama and Papa fell ill, and she had to look after them, there wasn't much opportunity for going out. Then they passed away, and everything was left to Alicia, and the thought of visiting anywhere alone made her feel physically sick. She didn't say any of that, though, instead simply answering, "My parents died, nearly three years ago now. It's uh, the reason I was so desperate for this governess job; I'm by myself, now."

She saw how his face fell. *Felt* the sympathy pouring from him. Even Samuel was looking at her with somber eyes, his lower lip wobbling dangerously.

"It was a long time ago," she cut in with a shrug before anybody could offer condolences. Alicia *hated* when people said they were sorry or tried to comfort her. It was just something that people said, and they never really meant it anyway.

"Even so," James replied quietly, "losing family is something nobody ever recovers from. Our mother died a long time ago, too, when these two were only young." He gestured to Jenny and Samuel, who were staring up at him with wide eyes. "If it isn't too much to ask... how did they die?"

Alicia stared down at her plate, which contained two sandwiches and

a little slice of quiche. "Consumption," she said finally, and just getting the word past her lips made her cringe. She hated to think about it, even now. It was a terrible way to go; slow and agonizing, and Alicia had to witness it all. Swallowing thickly, she added, "They were healthy people. Strong. It just came out of nowhere, none of us saw it coming. At least they died together."

James reached out, slipped his hand into hers. "I'm sorry," he murmured, "you don't deserve that. Nobody does. It must have been so terrible for you."

She only nodded, eyes downcast. She soaked up James' warmth, and the way his hands curled around hers was so comforting. She didn't care that it was inappropriate, or that Jenny was staring at her with a slowly growing smile. All that mattered was that James was here, holding her hand as if they were just two normal people comforting each other. In the moment, it was easy to forget what they really were to each other; just employee and employer.

When he smiled, it was radiant. He had full, rosy lips and perfect white teeth, and for the first time, Alicia noticed that he had little dimples in his cheeks. It made him look youthful and gentle in a way she had never seen before.

"Our mother died of illness too," he said softly, "pneumonia, we think, although it was never confirmed. She died in the middle of the night when we were all in bed." A pause, in which James' eyes flickered to Samuel, then Jenny. "I suppose there are worse ways to go than in your sleep."

Alicia offered a gentle smile, using her free hand to rest atop his. "Tell me about her. Your mother."

"She was the kindest woman I've ever known, although she kept to herself so not many people knew it." James smiled fondly at whatever memory had surfaced, and Alicia's heart melted. "She loved the woods, rode the horses through the trail almost every day. This old mare, Josephine, was always her favorite and she was heartbroken when Josephine got too old to ride."

"There's a painting of her in her old bedroom," Jenny added, "right above the bed where she and Papa used to sleep. She had beautiful blue eyes just like us, and bright blonde hair that she always wore in

two long braids. At least, that's what Papa used to tell me. I don't really remember."

"She had this blue dress she always wore, with gold trim around the sleeves and neckline. It cost an absolute fortune, so Papa made her promise to use it. She wore it for a month, only changing it to wash, just to prove a point." Samuel beamed, his eyes sparkling. "There are lots of stories about her, and Edwin used to tell us all the time before he went traveling."

Alicia smiled softly, removing her hand from James' just long enough to ruffle Samuel's hair. "She sounds like she was a lovely woman. I think she and my mother would have liked each other."

"If she were anything like you, they'd have got on splendidly," James said softly, "Mother would have loved you, too."

Alicia's heart thumped against her chest and nervous laughter threatened the back of her throat. She swallowed it down and said, "Really? Thank you; that's quite the honor."

James grinned and squeezed her hand once more before his grip slackened as he rested back on his knees.

Alicia couldn't help but feel a loss at the absence of his warmth, but what did she expect? The fact that he had touched her hands at all was reason enough to be happy. There was no point in hoping for more. He was only trying to make her feel better; and it had *worked*. Smiling brightly, Alicia plucked a sandwich from her plate and took a bite. "Regardless of why I came here, I'm glad I did," she said softly, "I'm sure our parents are looking at us right now, and I'm sure they're happy for us."

"I'm sure they are, too."

Alicia took another bite of sandwich, enjoying the savory taste of egg and cheese. Elizabeth had clearly taken a lot of care into making this picnic, because even something as simple as the sandwiches tasted *fantastic*. She polished off the whole thing before adding, "It's a shame I never got to meet your parents. They sound like lovely people."

James smiled and nodded; and when he did smile, his eyes brightened. Alicia noticed that he hadn't mentioned his father,

although Samuel and Jenny had, and she couldn't help but wonder if there was a reason for that. Hadn't she already told him that she believed he was innocent?

Don't pry, she chided herself quietly, *he's already told you about his mother. Don't be greedy*. With that in mind, Alicia reached for her tea and took a careful sip; it was less scalding than before, now pleasantly warm. When she set the cup down, James met her eyes from across the picnic blanket. Clear blue met bright green, and they shared a smile.

He was a strange man, one that Alicia couldn't quite figure out. Yet... well, she wasn't entirely sure that was a bad thing. She felt her chest swell with delight when they locked eyes, and he was *lovely*. Quickly dropping her gaze, Alicia tried to ignore the heavy flush that threatened her fair skin but allowed herself a small smile.

Perhaps, if she allowed herself to believe it, James would continue to open up to her. Maybe they could even call themselves *friends*.

Chapter Eighteen

No matter how hard he tried, James simply couldn't get the thought of Alicia out of his mind. He sat at his desk now, mind wandering as he stared out of the window and into the courtyard outside. No matter which way he put it, there was no denying that Alicia meant more to him now than any other employee.

Just thinking the words made his stomach twist, his cheeks burn. He had managed to go his entire life without having feelings for any woman. Why now?

There was a hesitant knock at the door; just a little tap that could have been missed, had James actually been engrossed in work like he was supposed to be. "Come in," he requested, gaze flickering to the door.

It was Samuel, dark hair a mess about his face and cheeks dirty. He was grinning though, lips parted to reveal a blank space where one of his front teeth should have been.

James paled. "What did you do?"

Samuel only grinned wider as he held out his hand. In his palm lay a little white tooth, speckled with a tiny dot of blood.

He wasn't in the mood for this today. He wasn't in the mood for this *any day*, but now least of all. Running a hand across his face, James sighed. "How did you even manage this, Samuel? I thought Alicia would have been with you to avoid things like this."

Samuel bounded over, flopped onto the nearest armchair, and *laughed*. "It was already loose," he said between giggles, "and I had this idea that Jenny could help me pull it out, but it sort of went wrong and I fell - but look, the tooth came out!"

James had to resist the urge to smack his head against the desk. What

on earth possessed his siblings to do something so absurd, he had no idea. "Samuel," he said with forced patience, "Miss Sempill and I are going for a walk soon, and I have something important I would like to say to her. Can you *please* refrain from anything silly for the rest of the day?"

He only shrugged as if to say *no promises*. "It doesn't even hurt," he insisted, "It did at first, but now it's just kind of numb where the tooth used to be."

It was a good thing that the maids were equipped with medical training, because James *really* didn't want to call a doctor for this. Rolling his eyes good naturedly, he ushered Samuel out of the room. "Go and clean up, please. And for goodness sake, don't hurt yourself further. Nora or one of the other maids can help."

"But I want *you* to help," Samuel insisted with a scowl. With one tooth missing, it looked even more ridiculous than usual. "Please?"

"How about you find Edwin? I think he's in the library."

"Who's in the library?" a familiar voice called from behind. When James turned, Edwin was hovering by the bottom of the stairs. "I was just a minute ago, but not anymore. What did poor Samuel do now?"

Samuel held out the tooth proudly. "Look! Now my big teeth will come in."

Big teeth. He meant adult teeth of course, but James still had to hold in a laugh at how Samuel phrased it. "As long as you don't go trying to pull out any other teeth, all right?"

"Oh, leave the boy be." Edwin waved a hand absently, then knelt down beside Samuel. "How did you even do this?"

"Tied a piece of string around the door handle," he answered, "except the string slipped and I hit the floor with my face instead."

When Edwin frowned, he looked exactly how James felt. They didn't always get on, but at least James could sympathize with him now. "Well, that was silly. Go and find a maid to clean you up; find your sister, too. I want you both out of the way this afternoon, your brother and I are very busy."

Samuel darted off, still clutching the tooth in one hand.

James rose a brow. "And what do you have to be busy about?"

He only tapped his nose. "Well, brother, lots of things. I'm... planning something."

"Leaving already?"

"Something like that."

Raising a brow, James simply sighed. He supposed that he should be used to it now; since father died, Edwin had been home all of two times, this being the second. Last time, he stayed only for a week before running off to somewhere in Europe. Italy maybe, or Spain. James had lost count of the places Edwin had been when he should have been at home.

It's his way of coping, James reminded himself sternly, *stop being so judgmental*. Still, it was difficult not to be, when Edwin was never around.

"Am I to believe that you and Alicia have plans today?" Edwin's voice snapped him from his thoughts, "How nice for you."

James' eyes narrowed. "Yes, we're going for a walk. There's no need to make it sound more complicated than it is."

Raising his hands, Edwin took a step back. "I only mean that the two of you have gotten awfully close. What does our Lady Agatha think about it all?"

"Agatha doesn't control what I do," James answered coolly, "and it's none of your business, anyway."

"Fine by me. It means that I have more time to myself this afternoon. Do say hello to Miss Sempill for me, would you? She's such a lovely girl."

James simply hummed in response and turned to slip back into his office. Edwin didn't follow, likely deciding to go back to his own study on the second floor. Wherever he was planning to run off to next,

James didn't want to know. They had never gotten on, not really, but it would have been nice if Edwin had stayed longer. For the children.

As James was putting away his ink and pen, there was another knock at the door. Stronger, with two quick raps, he recognized it instantly as Alicia's. "Come in," he called brightly, and some of the tension eased from his shoulders.

Alicia poked her head inside, a beautiful smile on her lips.

"I don't mean to interrupt," she murmured, "but are you ready?"

James smiled brightly. "Of course." Then he joined her side, an arm offered for her to take. It felt so oddly *natural* to have her by his side, as if she had always fit there. She was small and slender but hardly *frail*, with delicate arms cloaked in a dark green cardigan that matched her eyes.

They wandered outside together, arm in arm. The sun shone overhead, but there were clouds that dulled the brightness. Even so, it was pleasantly warm and without a breeze, leaving it a little hotter than normal. They wandered down a random path, of which there were plenty to choose from, and simply enjoyed the weather.

Walking like this, with Alicia, was the easiest thing in the world. The difficult part was working up the courage to actually talk to her. Not with idle conversation, no, but to tell her how he really felt. He had spent all of last night working it up in his mind, trying to find the right words to say, but now... well, he couldn't force himself to utter a word.

Painlessly oblivious to his inner turmoil, Alicia was simply happy to walk by his side and admire the wildlife. Butterflies fluttered past, and tiny red ladybugs darted past their feet. The awe on her pretty features was wonderful, and the way her eyes followed the butterflies made his heart warm.

After a moment, he somehow found his words. "Miss Sempill," he started, "I feel as if we've known each other for long enough now that formalities can be, well, *lessened*. I believe I would feel more comfortable if you referred to me as James."

Her gaze fluttered to him, brows furrowed. "Oh?"

James felt his cheeks color. "Well, I've never liked being formal, even with my staff, but I've asked you before, and I notice that you still refer to me as *Lord*." Everyone under his employ insisted on calling him *Lord Arvill*, his proper title, and only some were relaxed enough to simply call him sir.

She seemed to consider it for a moment, lip caught between her teeth. "I'm afraid my answer still stands. I don't know if I would be comfortable with that, my lord."

James couldn't help the frown that fell across his face. Did she really object to it that much? He supposed it made sense, although the thought made his chest ache. "It's your choice," he reassured, "but I would like for you to consider it, at least."

Perhaps he had misjudged. The thought made nerves coil in his stomach, and he couldn't help but wince. All those days ago, hadn't Alicia admitted to being *jealous*? Jealous of Agatha, and the time she spent with him? He had taken that to mean that Alicia harbored some kind of feelings for him... now he had to wonder.

"I can't help but wonder," Alicia said idly, "if you do this for me because you feel guilty."

"Guilty? For what?"

She only offered an awkward shrug in reply, lips caught between her teeth. Although she kept her eyes forward, James didn't miss the flicker of nerves across her face. "Why else would you spend so much time with me? I'm only a governess, here to look after your siblings; yet you treat me almost like family."

James faltered. He stopped in the middle of the path, wide eyes turning to Alicia. Did she really think so little of him? Or was it her own insecurities taking over? "Miss Sempill," he said calmly, offering her a gentle smile, "you *are* family. The children think of you as such, and I've come to care deeply for you myself." This was dangerously close to a true confession; and now that it was on the tip of his tongue, he couldn't quite manage to finish. *I love you*, he wanted to say. Instead, he added, "Governess or no, you belong here with us."

Well, it wasn't quite what he had aimed for, but despite the nerves rolling in his stomach, James didn't have it in him to be disappointed.

She offered him a gentle smile, soft laughter rumbling in her chest. James loved her laugh, thought it was the most beautiful thing he had ever heard; it was light and musical, even when she tried to muffle it behind her sleeve.

"I mean it," he added, "having you here has done wonders for everyone in this house. Even Edwin, although he doesn't plan on staying for long enough to get to know you, I'm afraid."

She only shrugged. "I've still been mostly avoiding him, which isn't difficult honestly. He spends a lot of time locked away in his study. Is he always like this?"

James' chest stuttered, disappointed by the change of topic. He was *so close* to confessing, but now his chance was gone. "Not always," he replied softly, "but he withdrew once mother died, and now he's worse than before." *Because of father's death*, he added silently. There was no need to say it aloud.

Alicia hummed, and she was about to reply before her eyes snapped wide, lips forming a small, silent *o*.

Then a voice called, "James, how good to see you!", as the click of heeled boots drew ever closer. James didn't have to turn to know who it was.

Agatha.

Chapter Nineteen

The sight of Agatha, her blonde hair tumbling over her shoulders like a yellow waterfall, turned Alicia's mood sour within seconds. She watched as the woman in question strode up to them, tossing her hair over her shoulder, and beamed at James.

"How are you?" she asked, completely ignoring Alicia. "I was in the vicinity, and I thought we could have tea?"

"Agatha, I don't think-"

"All three of us, even?" She turned her green gaze to Alicia. Their eyes were strikingly similar, Alicia noticed; Agatha's eyes were a pale sort of teal, but under the bright sunshine they were almost the same as Alicia's jewel toned green. It wasn't a comparison that Alicia wanted to make, yet here she was.

"Agatha," James said softly, placing an arm on her shoulder. He frowned, thick brows furrowed. "This isn't really the time. You usually write."

"Like I said, I was in the area." She shrugged dainty shoulders. "Now. Tea?"

James scowled, but he relented. "I was planning on having tea brought outside for Alicia and me," he said coolly, "but there won't be enough for three. Please, Agatha, go home. You can visit another day."

But Agatha held her ground, arms folded across her chest as she rolled her eyes in such a dramatic way. "Really? Once you would have *jumped* at the chance to spend time together. What changed?" Her gaze flickered to Alicia with a scowl. "I'll tell you what changed; *her*. Things were great between us before she came along, and now everything is different."

Alicia felt anger bubble up inside of her. Despite her best efforts, she

found her hands curling into fists until her knuckles turned white.

Agatha didn't notice. She was too busy glaring at James, as if he were the sole cause of everything wrong in the world. "I don't understand it," she snapped, "everything was *perfect*. Then she had to come along and ruin it for both of us." Tears sprang to her eyes then, and Alicia felt a little jolt of sympathy that she tried to push down. "We've always been so good together; we were going to get *married*."

James choked, a hand flying to clamp over his lips. "We were never going to get married, Agatha. You know it." He couldn't seem to look at Agatha now, his gaze fixed on the ground as he spoke. "We've always been friends, but nothing more. Please stop acting like we're more than that."

Fresh tears spilled down Agatha's cheeks - and Alicia couldn't help but think that James had been too cold, even to her. Through gritted teeth she said, "My lord, please don't be so harsh."

"I don't need your pity," Agatha snapped, and she swiped angrily at the tears rolling down her cheeks. "I have better places to be than here, anyway." Then she turned on her heel and stormed off down the path, back towards the driveway in the distance. A carriage waited for her, and she climbed inside without even waiting for the coachman's assistance.

"Tea, my lord?" James and Alicia turned to see Nora holding a tray with two teacups, and a little pitcher of milk. She smiled awkwardly. "Was that Lady Agatha I just saw leaving?"

"It was," James said simply, "thank you for the tea, Nora."

They settled down to drink their tea, at a little table near the rose gardens. The sweet, perfumed scent of the flowers calmed Alicia's nerves, at least enough so she didn't feel too shaky as she reached for her tea. She added a healthy amount of milk, and just a little sugar to settle her stomach.

James did the same to his, although he didn't drink right away. Instead, he swirled the tea around in the cup, staring into the milky depths with a frown. "I'm so sorry for Agatha," he murmured, "it seems all I ever do is apologize on behalf of people I know."

Alicia's heart ached for him. She smiled, hoping to put him at ease, and said, "You have nothing to apologize for. She loves you, and I don't think she understands why you spend so much time with me. Truthfully, neither do I."

He hesitated for a moment, as if the words were right on his tongue, but he couldn't *quite* bring himself to say them. Eventually he only sighed and put down his cup, without having taken a single sip. "I enjoy your company," he said at last, and although it wasn't what Alicia had hoped for, it still made her chest bloom with happiness.

"I enjoy yours too, my lord." She smiled, dazzled by his lovely blue eyes and the hesitant little smile he offered back. She was so distracted, in fact, that she didn't even notice when she went to set her tea down and it caught on the edge of the table, sending the contents spilling onto the ground at her feet. She gasped and jumped back, nervous laughter spilling from her throat. "I am *so sorry*."

James was on his feet in an instant. "Are you all right? Did it touch you?"

"No," she answered kindly, a flush spreading across her cheeks, "I think it's all soaking into the ground."

He relaxed, urging her to sit back down. "As long as it didn't burn you, that's what matters." He smiled and reached for his own drink. "Here, have mine; we take it the same way and I haven't taken a drink yet."

Oh. She couldn't do that. "I already had half of my own," she murmured, "that will do-"

"I insist," he interjected, gently pushing the cup into her hands. He really was too kind for his own good, wasn't he?

Knowing it was easier not to argue, Alicia gently took the mug from James' warm hands and took a sip. It tasted just as good, with the same sugar and milk, and she felt a burst of gratefulness toward him for his kindness. "Thank you," she said softly, "I already feel better."

"I'm glad," James replied with a beaming smile. "Now, where to next? I haven't visited the maze in a while or taken a stroll through the woods."

"Whatever you want," she replied, "I'm happy as long as you are." And she meant it, too.

Chapter Twenty

After tea with James, Alicia retired to the library to read. There were hundreds of books to choose from, a whole array of both fiction and history, gardening and cookbooks, books on geography and etiquette and just about every other topic imaginable. Alicia stared up at the tall shelves with a smile on her lips as she perused the options.

It was more difficult than normal to choose something; there was a persistent ache in the back of her skull that refused to leave, making it difficult to concentrate on anything for more than a few minutes at a time. When she turned her head, nausea rose in the back of her throat, and she had to swallow down the urge to double over.

Still, a good book and another cup of tea would probably do the trick, and she could even sit by the window seat to enjoy the sunshine. "If only I could spend the entire day with Lord Arvill," she mused quietly, knowing it was impossible. A quiet evening by herself would have to do.

Eventually she chose an adventure novel, one she had never heard of before, and settled in to read. The window seat overlooking the rose gardens, was a little cramped, but the cushions were soft. The sunshine was hidden behind clouds now, but enough still peeked through to give a beautiful view of the horizon, dotted with beautiful rose bushes and lattices of climbing flowers. *Stunning*.

Flipping the book open, Alicia began to read. That persistent headache nagged at her mind, though, slowly spreading from the back of her skull to a sharper sting near her temples. She often had stress headaches, when Mama and Papa first died, and she was trying to figure out what to do; but this wasn't like that. No, even after everything that had happened with Agatha, this didn't feel like one of those old stress headaches coming back.

After another five minutes, Alicia snapped the book closed. Perhaps peppermint tea would help? If not, perhaps a quick nap in bed. She stood, leaving the book in the little reading nook to wander towards

the kitchens.

Except she barely made it through the grand library doors before a wave of nausea washed over her. Alicia snapped at the waist and doubled over, a low hiss of pain leaving her lips. When she did, the world spun around her, and she felt another spike of nausea hit her in the stomach like a physical force. Eyes scrunched shut, Alicia bit down on her lip. *I will not throw up in the hallway*, she told herself. There was one bathroom upstairs, because of course a marquess was wealthy enough to have indoor fixtures, and if she could just get up the stairs...

She tried to take a step. Just one, tiny step away from the wall. Her hands shook as she crept along the hall, pressed against her torso as if to try and keep herself upright. With every small step, the hallway continued to spin; Alicia felt like she was twirling around and around in a circle, for the way everything waved and dipped around her. Alicia couldn't remember the last time she had been sick, she had always been a healthy woman, but this was unlike *anything* she had ever felt before. It was like her brain was trying to break free from her skull, and her stomach twisted itself into knots with each uneasy intake of breath.

There was somebody else in the hall. It was something that Alicia was only dimly aware of because her eyes wouldn't focus. She saw a small, dark figure dart into her line of sight. Worried eyes shone, but then the figure moved, and everything was spinning again.

"Miss Sempill," a woman's voice asked, "is everything all right? What are you doing in the servant's quarters?"

Servant's quarters. No, that wasn't right; she had been trying to get to the foyer, so she could go upstairs and use the bathroom. Or had she wanted to run a bath? Now she couldn't even remember. She blinked up at the figure - but *up* wasn't right. Hadn't she been the taller of the two a second ago? Her head pounded so frantically that she couldn't concentrate, and now the figure was gone.

"She needs a doctor," a voice said. Unfamiliar. Male. It sounded like Archie, but she couldn't be sure.

"I'll fetch Lord Arvill," the female voice replied, thick with concern. "She was fine earlier when I brought tea."

The man - maybe Archie, maybe not - murmured something else, but now the words had stopped sounding real and Alicia couldn't decipher them. Something about being sick?

She was kneeling now; she knew that much. Alicia felt the wood digging into her knees and her nails scratching as her hands clenched into fists. It was getting more difficult to breathe by the second, her pulse racing and head aching, but she still tried to pick herself up. She almost managed, before her foot caught on her skirts and she went down, elbows smacking off the floor as she landed on her side.

"Miss!" a voice called, almost *screamed*, and Alicia just wanted it to stop. Why did she have to be so loud? "Don't try to move," the woman insisted, but her words were jumbled and hard to listen to. "I'm going to get Lord Arvill."

Then there was the skitter of feet as the woman darted off; but Alicia didn't hear anything more because at that moment her head lolled back as she collapsed fully onto the floor, and everything went black.



"Miss Sempill needs help!" Nora burst into James' study, her eyes wild and voice almost a screech. Her whole body was shaking when James' gaze shot towards her. "She collapsed in the servant's quarters, and I couldn't get a word out of her."

James' throat closed up. *Collapsed?* But they had been together half an hour ago and she had seemed perfectly fine. Shaken over Agatha's outburst, but otherwise completely healthy. Fear spiked in his chest as he asked, "Where is she now?"

"Still there. I couldn't bring myself to move her, but Archie said he'd take her to her room." Nora was pale, sickly, and she looked ready to throw up. "She's in a bad way, my lord, but I don't know what's wrong-"

"Have Archie summon a doctor immediately," he cut in, before the poor girl got herself into a panic. Truthfully, James wasn't doing much better. His hands shook as he clasped them on his desk, and it took almost all of his self-restraint not to run to Alicia right there. "Please, don't waste any time. I'll be there as soon as I can."

With that, Nora flew out into the hall, already shouting for Archie. He heard her stumble and curse, before she vanished into the adjoining hallway.

James took a breath. Steadied himself. It didn't work because his chest was hammering against his ribs and his pulse raced. Hadn't Alicia been fine, not half an hour ago? Or had she perhaps been pretending for his sake? The thought made *him* feel ill, and he tried another deep breath to calm his nerves.

It didn't help, so he resigned himself and slowly inched into the foyer. It was eerily silent, out here, with not a soul in sight. He inched down the hallway and slipped into the servant's quarters, where the sound of commotion grew. He almost didn't want to look, couldn't bear to see his Alicia hurt; but he forced himself to take in the situation.

Two of the maids sat by Alicia's crumpled form. One held her head in her lap, gently brushing brown hair from her closed eyes. Alicia might have even looked peaceful, if not for the sweat clinging to her skin and the uneasy way in which her eyelids flickered. Whatever had happened to make her so poorly, it had happened fast.

"Archie and Nora are summoning a doctor," one of the maids, Georgette, murmured, "She feels so clammy, my lord, but it's always cold in this hall."

James couldn't tell if it was cold or not; not when his heart pounded the way it did, his hands damp and sweat clinging to the back of his neck. "Let me take her upstairs," he insisted, crouching to Georgette's height. "She'll be more comfortable in familiar surroundings."

Neither of the girls complained. They let him carry Alicia without complaint, stepping back to allow him better access. When he looked down, his heart clenched. She had always been petite, but now Alicia looked so *frail*. Pale skin, hair splayed out around her, eyes fluttering frantically beneath their lids; she looked nearly at death's door, when half an hour ago she had been full of life.

She hardly weighed a thing as James carried her upstairs. Edwin and the children were nowhere to be seen, thank goodness, because he hated to think of poor Jenny and Samuel witnessing her like this. He opened the door with his foot and slipped inside her bedroom; not even bothering with lights. Then he laid her carefully down on the

bed, gently tucking the sheets around her.

Somehow, when he brushed a hand across her forehead, she felt hot and cold all at once. Her skin was burning like a fever, but the rest of her face was pale. Bending down, James couldn't stop himself from pressing a kiss to her forehead.

"The doctor will be here soon," a voice said from behind. James jumped, spinning to see Archie standing by the doorway. "Sorry my lord, I didn't mean to startle you."

James offered an uneasy smile. "No, it's all right. Thank you, Archie. Please, bring the doctor up as soon as he arrives."

"Of course." Then he slipped from the room, letting the door fall softly shut, and left James in darkness.

At some point, James must have moved; because he found himself sitting in a chair by Alicia's bedside, the curtains open to let in natural light, without even realizing he had moved the chair *or* opened the curtains. He didn't remember fetching another blanket, either, but when he looked down there was one tossed across his lap. It was a soft burgundy, soft beneath his fingertips, and he toyed idly with a loose thread while he waited.

Not once did Alicia regain consciousness, but he was too afraid to try and wake her. What if it made her worse? Instead, he reached out to take her clammy hand in one of his own and squeezed.

"The doctor is here," said a soft voice from the doorway. "Doctor Ashburn, my lord."

"Come in."

James' eyes flickered up as the doctor entered. He was middle aged, with a thick mop of graying hair and glasses perched atop his nose. He smiled kindly at James as he set down his medical bag by the foot of the bed. "Am I to believe that you're the lord of this house, Lord James Arvill?"

"Yes."

"And this is Alicia Sempill?"

"Yes."

He nodded, coming around to her bedside. He peered down at her for a moment, a frown slowly crossing her features.

"Is it a fever, doctor?" James asked after a moment, "She was fine this afternoon."

Doctor Ashburn shook his head as he pressed a hand against her forehead. "No, a fever wouldn't come on so suddenly, my lord. You said she was fine before? When did she start showing symptoms?"

She had been alone when Nora found her. James swallowed, his throat like sandpaper. "She was fine not an hour before we summoned you. We walked through the gardens, had a cup of tea, and then she retired to the library to read."

"Tea, you say?" He lifted one of Alicia's eyelids, which fluttered when he let go. Then he tried the other. "Has she eaten anything today?"

"She often skips breakfast, and she ate the same thing my family did for the afternoon meal. We haven't had supper yet."

His frown deepened, and it made James' stomach turn. That wasn't the look of a man who had confidence in what he knew. "My lord, would you mind leaving my patient and I alone for a while? I'll need peace and concentration if I'm to know what's wrong."

James' hand tightened around hers. It was childish, silly, to feel so horrified at the prospect of leaving her. Yet when he tried to pry himself away, he couldn't quite make it happen. "I'm sorry," he murmured, "can't I stay?"

Doctor Ashburn clicked his tongue; then he must have remembered who he was talking to, because he bit down on his lip and said, "I'm afraid not, my lord. It's in this young lady's best interests."

All right. He could leave if he knew it meant giving Alicia a better chance at recovery. Tearing himself from her side, he shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his trousers - for if he didn't, he would

be tempted to grab a hold of her all over again. "Please, call me as soon as you have an answer."

"Of course."

It hurt to leave her, so small and frail in that big four poster bed. Yet he did it, somehow, closing the door behind him. Now standing in the hall, leaning against the door, James let out a strangled gasp. Every breath made his lungs ache, but he forced another and another down his throat, until his pulse finally began to return to normal. Mostly, anyway. He didn't think he would truly calm until he knew Alicia was all right.

"My lord?" a small voice called from his left, "is she going to be okay?"

It was Nora, wringing her apron between her hands as she wiped tears from her eyes. She looked up at him with a hopeful expression, lips parted just enough that he could hear her rasping, struggling breaths. The poor girl was trying hard to keep herself together.

"I'm sure she will be," he answered, forcing false cheer into his voice. It fell flat, but he didn't have the energy to try any more. He felt ill, stomach queasy, but he knew it was nothing compared to what Alicia was going through right now, just beyond the bedroom door.

"I was going to make tea," Nora murmured, "but I don't know if I can stomach it now. Would... would it be all right if I waited with you, my lord?"

He couldn't say no to her softly pleading face, so he nodded in agreement. "Of course, Nora. Though I ask that if you see the children, please take them somewhere else. I don't want them seeing anything until we know for sure what's wrong."

Nora nodded and swiped at her eyes again. They were red and puffy, and James felt a jolt of shock at the sight. He hadn't known that she was all that close with Alicia; then again, Nora had always been a delicate girl.

They stood together in silence for a long time, waiting for the doctor to make himself known. It felt like James waited for hours, although in reality it was probably much less. Without a clock or a pocket watch, it was impossible to know for certain.

Eventually, Nora broke the silence. "When I found her, she could barely stand. What could do that in such a short space of time?"

James didn't have an answer. He wished he did, dearly so, but it was beyond him.

Chapter Twenty-One

James didn't like to interrogate his staff, but it seemed he had no choice. He thought of Alicia, lying unconscious in her bed, and he was filled with a new determination to find out who did this to her.

Two maids sat across from him now, both fidgeting awkwardly with the hems of their aprons. Nora was one of them; and the other was Olivia, the head housekeeper of the manor. Olivia, at least, managed to keep her calm; but James had never seen poor Nora look so nervous.

"I just need to know what happened," he said kindly, "Nora already told me some, but if *anyone* saw anything, I need to know."

Olivia's gaze flickered between James and Nora; lip caught between her lips. "I'm afraid that I didn't see anything," came her reply, "I wasn't there when Miss Sempill collapsed, my lord."

"The doctor said it was poison. Could somebody find something poisonous on this estate?"

Olivia let out a ragged sigh. "My lord, why would we keep *poisons* on the property? Unless there's some kind of dangerous plants growing in the woods at the back of the manor, I don't see how anyone could find something here." Her eyes flickered to the window, brows furrowed as if she could somehow see the woods from here.

This was getting him nowhere. Nobody had seen a thing, and it was becoming increasingly obvious that this was a waste of time. He had spoken to all of the maids, the butler, even the coachman since he had been in the servant's quarters at the time. Yet James was no closer to an answer than he was before.

"Will that be all, my lord?" Olivia asked tentatively, her bright blue eyes turned to regard him. When he nodded wordlessly, she stood,

towing Nora away with her.

Nora glanced back once, worry in her gaze, but didn't offer a word.

Alone again, James took a moment to steady his breath. It didn't work, and instead his breath came out as a strangled gasp. Now tempted to simply drop his head onto the desk, James let out a low groan.

"You asked to see me, sir?"

James looked up to see Archie by the door, his hands held neatly by his side. He looked older than James remembered, his cheeks sallow and eyes dark with concern. Nodding, he ushered Archie inside. "Yes, please sit down. You see everything in this house, Archie, and I wanted to know if you've seen anything, well, odd today."

"Is this because of Miss Sempill, my lord?"

"It is."

Archie let out a great sigh as he sat, his head bowed. "How is she?" he asked, and there was genuine concern in his deep voice.

James didn't think that he knew Miss Sempill all that well; but perhaps he was worried for a fellow employee. As the oldest person in this manor, employee or otherwise, he had a habit of somewhat taking the younger ones under his wing. Regardless, it was good to know that he cared. "Archie, have you noticed any of the staff acting unusual recently? Anyone showing any sort of hostility towards Miss Sempill, or else just not acting like themselves?"

He knew, immediately, that it was the wrong thing to ask. Archie flushed red, a wide-eyed look flashing across his face so briefly, that James might have missed it had he not known Archie so well. "My lord," he said slowly, as if it was a struggle to say the words, "are you suggesting that one of our own tried to hurt her?"

Irritation bubbled in James' chest, and he snapped, "Are you questioning me, Archie?"

He flushed even darker but leaned away from the desk. "Of course not,

my lord."

"Good." Immediately, James felt a wash of guilt that dampened everything else. It wasn't Archie's fault that Alicia was ill. But it was *somebody's* fault, and he had to find out who. With a deep breath, he asked, "Is there anyone you know who might want to hurt her."

Archie only shook his head, eyes downcast. "No, there's nobody. Miss Sempill is well respected here, and I can't imagine anyone wanting to do her harm. She gets on well with the maids, and on the occasions, I've seen her she always says hello and greets me with a smile. I don't see a reason for someone to... what did happen, exactly?"

James' lips formed a thin line, and he had to fight to get the words out. "She's been poisoned, although I don't know by what."

"Ask the gardener, my lord," Archie suggested, "I've been told that there are certain plants one can use to slip into a person's drink." He winced. "This is purely from reading books, of course."

It was the second time that someone had suggested such a thing, and now it had stuck – not that any of it made sense. "Thank you, Archie," James said, dismissing him with a smile, "you may leave."

"Would you like me to send for the gardener?"

"No, I'll find him myself."

Archie nodded, then slipped from the study as silently as if he were walking on air. Even when he closed the door, it didn't make a sound.

A headache had formed in the back of his skull now, and James rubbed his temples with the flat of his hands. When he stood, the pain only increased, jabbing at the back of his head like a little needle stabbing him a dozen times. Ignoring it, James pushed past the door and strode into the hall-

And right into Edwin.

Edwin yelped as he stumbled back; and James did too, bumping into the wall behind. As Edwin righted himself, straightening out his waistcoat in the process, he quirked a brow in James' direction. "Any

reason why you're trying to kill me, brother?"

"Sorry, I simply wasn't watching where I was going."

"Evidently." His expression furrowed. "I saw a doctor by the guest wing. Miss Sempill is the only one staying there, is she not?"

Ah, he hadn't heard? In his panic, James had been so focused on gathering the staff that telling Edwin had... well, it had fled his mind. Besides, he was always so busy doing God knew what, that it was often pointless to interrupt him. "She passed out in the servant's wing earlier," he replied, "I think she was on her way back from the library and got turned around. The doctor says it's poison."

Edwin paled. His eyes flickered to the grand staircase, into the darkness leaking from the long hallways, and scowled. "Poison?"

"That's what he said."

Lips pursed, he didn't reply at first - when he did, it was with the cool kind of practicality that James had never expected from a man like Edwin. "Poison is a terrible thing; if you don't know what kind has been used, there's not much we can do. If she can't flush it out of her system... I'm sorry, James. I know you like the girl."

That was it? Cold, emotionless acceptance that Alicia was already as good as gone? The headache thudded in the back of his skull, but now it had spread to behind his eyes, making his vision fuzzy. "Edwin," he said with forced calm, "you don't know the first thing about *anything* medical, and neither do I. Let's leave Doctor Ashburn to do his job, shall we?"

Edwin flushed, pale cheeks turning cherry red as he folded thick arms across his chest. "I'm only trying to prepare you for the worst outcome," he snapped, "but please, ignore me."

If they had been younger, less mature, James might have had a few choice words for Edwin then. Perhaps he might have even lashed out. He was a marquess now though, and couldn't indulge in such childish things, so he fought down the urge to snap and forced a breath from his lungs. He wasn't a man arguing with his brother; he was a marquess trying to look after his staff.

Edwin turned to storm up the stairs, shoes thudding heavily on the carpet. "The children are in their rooms," he called down to James, "It's getting late, and I imagine they're asleep. Do you plan to tell them what's happened to their dear governess?"

James had to crush that urge again; the urge to stride up those steps and give Edwin the lecture he deserved for his coldness. Instead, he simply answered, "Tomorrow, maybe. I don't want them to be hurt."

Edwin hummed in response, then vanished upstairs.

Leaving James alone, for the first time all day, to deal with his feelings. Maybe it was better to be alone than to be with Edwin right now, so he tried to ignore the loneliness creeping up on him. After a moment, he followed Edwin's footsteps up the stairs, and found himself standing by Alicia's bedroom door once again.

Doctor Ashburn was still there, muttering quietly as he looked over Alicia. Although what else he could possibly do after such a long time, James didn't know. Hadn't they already established that there was nothing they could do?

The door creaked open as James stood there - and as if on cue, Doctor Ashburn slipped into the hall. He blinked up at James for a moment, his gray eyes wary. "Lord Arvill."

"Any progress?"

Doctor Ashburn shook his head. "Whoever did this to her, they were thorough. I'm afraid that I don't know what was used; many poisons present the same symptoms; unconsciousness, muscle weakness, difficulty breathing... the list of possible ailments is long, Lord Arvill." His eyes flickered to the door, which was firmly shut behind him. "Do you know anyone who would want to hurt her?"

"That's exactly what I've been trying to find out," he replied. For some reason, James felt the overwhelming need to whisper; it was silly, really, because it wasn't as if Alicia could hear him in her current state. Even so, he wanted to spare her from the pain of knowing someone had done this intentionally. "I just can't imagine anyone disliking her at all, never mind enough to - wait..."

Quirking a brow, Doctor Ashburn waited.

Agatha. Hadn't Agatha been acting odd for her entire visit? Not just today, in fact, but ever since Alicia had become the children's governess? It was clear that she held some less than savory opinions about Alicia - completely unfounded, of course, but that wasn't the point. Except, they had been friends for *years*, Agatha and him; why would she have any desire to hurt his staff?

Because she doesn't see Alicia as just a governess, his mind chided, she sees Alicia as competition.

"Lord Arvill?"

He snapped back to attention with a jolt, eyes going wide. "I think I know who did it."

Doctor Ashburn parted his lips to reply - but James was already darting down the hall. He heard the doctor calling after him, but he was already so far away that the words were lost.

Within moments, he was standing in the foyer, breathing heavily. Organizing horses and a carriage would take too long. The coachman had retired for the evening, too. James glanced outside and saw a cool breeze rustling the trees; he'd have to walk. Soon, he was stumbling past the doors before Archie could protest, shouting a halfhearted excuse about needing to see Agatha *now*.

Her home was almost twenty minutes away on foot - they lived in the same neighborhood, at least, where the houses were all enormous white buildings with acres of land all to themselves. James' was the largest though, meaning that once he was standing on the street, he could stare down and see the other houses dotting the distance.

Without pausing for breath, James stormed towards Agatha's home. He only passed two other similar homes on the way, as spread out by lands and woods as they were, before he was practically *sprinting* along Agatha's long, narrow driveway.

Somehow, though, James managed to calm himself enough to look presentable as he knocked frantically on the door. *Please let me be wrong*, he thought, feeling his heart shudder. There was a part of him that simply refused to believe that Agatha could be behind this; but he had to admit that she was the only person who disliked Alicia enough to try something so horrible.

A short, squat doorman answered, brows furrowed as he caught James standing, breathless, on the front steps. "Lord Arvill?" he asked, "It's awfully late-"

"I need to see Agatha. Please. It's important."

The doorman hesitated briefly, eyes dark filled with concern, before stepping aside. "Of course. Please, come in, and I'll see if she's available."

Unlike his own home, there was nowhere to sit in this pearly white foyer. All of the doors were closed, and most likely many of the inhabitants of the house had already retired to bed for the evening. Those that *were* awake wouldn't appreciate the intrusion - but for once, James didn't care if he disturbed someone else.

He waited. And waited. And waited. With each passing minute, James felt his breath hitching more and anxiety growing in his stomach. She didn't seem to want to come at all, and James had the horrible thought that he'd have to leave without ever seeing her-

Then the woman in question swept into the foyer from a room off to the side - the library, James knew - her long hair swirling about her head. "James?" she asked, "My doorman just said that you were here, but I thought he was mistaken. Have you come to apologize for earlier?"

Apologize. It was Agatha that needed to apologize, for treating Alicia in such a way - but their fight wasn't important right now. "Alicia is very ill," he snapped, "and she was fine before you left. Did you do something to her?"

Agatha flinched, physically reeling back. The hurt that flashed across her face made James' heart ache, but then her expression turned cold. "Do you really think I'd do that? *Truly*, James? I know I can be short tempered and frustrating, but to accuse me of trying to hurt someone-"

"Please," James cut in; and he hated how tears threatened to blur his vision. Blinking them away, he tried again. "Tell me the truth. If you did it, just tell me. I don't have the energy for lies today." He had already lost mother, and then father. James didn't think that he could lose another loved one.

Agatha's eyes fluttered wide, then, and she regarded James with quiet realization. "You really love her, don't you?"

His heart thudded against his ribs, and for a long moment he couldn't form a reply. When he did, it was with a stuttering voice. "I-I don't know what you mean."

Her expression softened, just a little, as she placed a hand on his shoulder. "I promise you I didn't do anything to Miss Sempill, or anyone else. Whatever happened, it was nothing to do with me. I'm sorry."

He found himself nodding dumbly; yet no matter how much James wanted to believe that Agatha was innocent, he just *couldn't*. Agatha had always been selfish and impulsive. Jealous. Yet *this*, it was a whole new and horrible kind of cruel. He had never considered that she was capable of cruelty; yet hadn't she only proved that she was, earlier today? She had been so horrible to Alicia, calling her names and acting like she deserved it simply for being there. Was it really so much of a step from feeling jealous, to doing something about it?

When James looked back up,

Agatha's eyes had filled with tears. She wrenched her hand from his shoulder with a look of disgust. "Don't believe me, then. I know you, James, and you'll believe whatever you want if it fits your own narrative." She stepped back, boots clicking on the tiled floor, and gestured to the door. "If you really think I'm capable of such a thing, then you won't want to stay in my house any longer. I think it's time you left."

He only blinked down at her, brows furrowed. "Agatha-

"*Leave!*" Her voice echoed throughout the foyer, bouncing off the high ceilings and making James' headache throb more than ever. "Go back to Alicia and make sure she's okay, but don't bother coming back here until you realize what you've just accused me of."

Now it was his turn to feel the urge to shout, creeping up on him. "You've never cared about other people," he snapped, "you're selfish and rude, and I don't know why I'm friends with you." Almost immediately, he regretted the words. Even so, he held his ground. "I hope you're not lying to me, Agatha; because if you are, you're going

to regret it."

Just then, a figure appeared in the open doorway. They wore a long coat, face obscured by the darkness - but when the doorman appeared, James realized who it was; one of the butlers from his very own estate.

"Charles?" James gasped, "What on earth are you doing here?"

His gaze flickered nervously from James to Agatha, shifting from foot to foot like a little bird. "Archie told me I'd find you here," he murmured, "and there's something you have to know. There's been a, uh, development with Miss Sempill."

Just like that, the anger drained from James. He stepped forward, feeling his stomach lurch. "What is it?"

"You'd better come home and see for yourself, my lord. You'll want to."

He didn't need to be told twice. Turning back to Agatha, he blurted, "I have to go."

"Good," came her only response, "don't come back unless it's to apologize."

This time, he didn't try to argue. James only darted outside after Charles, without another word, desperate to get home.

Chapter Twenty-Two

It took half as much time to get home as it had to leave. James burst through the doors before Archie could even fully open them, stumbling into the foyer without a care for who saw. There was no time to care for things like appearances when Alicia's life was at risk.

"What happened while I was gone?" he asked immediately, turning to regard both Charlie and Archie expectantly. "Charlie said here was a development in Alicia. Does that mean she's woken up?"

The two shared a look, frowning deeply. "Not exactly," Archie replied awkwardly, "Miss Sempill is in the same condition you left her in, my lord. But if you go into the kitchen, perhaps things will make more sense."

James felt heat bubbling under his skin. Hands clenched, he snapped, "Why does nobody speak plainly here? Just tell me what's going on. *Please.*"

Archie offered a kind smile and gestured to the hallway where the kitchen waited. "I believe we've discovered who tried to poison Alicia, but it isn't what you think."

At that, James perked up and he turned to stare across the foyer at the dark hallway beyond. "We know who did it?"

"I think so, my lord."

His feet carried him without even thinking, clicking loudly on the tiled floor as he traversed the foyer. The hallway was dark, unlit save for the light filtering in from the kitchen at the end, but James didn't pause as he darted through the darkness. When he came into the kitchen, three pairs of eyes turned to stare up at him.

It was the head cook that he noticed first, her cheeks scarlet and expression furious. Mrs. Harvey wasn't a woman to be messed with,

and she had terrified many junior cooks in her time at the Arvill's estate. Now, it seemed, she was angrier than ever.

The second person he noticed was Nora. She sat on a stool beside Mrs. Harvey, curled in on herself as if she wanted to vanish. When her wide eyes turned to James, he saw tears there.

The third figure was smaller than the rest. His head was bowed as he scrubbed tears from his eyes, and his hat was pulled low over his ruddy face. It was Mrs. Harvey's son, Jacob.

James tried to keep his calm. He took a deep breath and willed himself to be reasonable, because it was clear that things were bad enough as it was. Brows raised, he turned to Mrs. Harvey and said, "Please explain to me just what is going on?"

If it was even possible, her cheeks flushed darker, and she scowled. "You'd better ask the boy. It's his fault, and if you decide to punish him, I won't object."

The boy? What could little Jacob have done that was so terrible? Confusion swelling in his chest, James knelt by Jacob and tilted his hat upwards to get a better look at his face.

It was streaked with tears, although by now the worst had begun to dry. He avoided James' gaze and sniffled awkwardly, swiping at his face with an already filthy handkerchief.

"Jacob," James said gently, "would you mind telling me what happened? You know what happened to Miss Sempill, don't you?"

After a long moment, he nodded. "I do."

"All right." James fished his own handkerchief from the pocket in his waistcoat and handed it to the boy. "Take a deep breath, and tell me when you're ready—"

"He won't," Mrs. Harvey cut in then, "my boy here is a coward. He knows what happened to that poor girl, but he won't even tell me." Her brows furrowed as she turned to Jacob. "You're eleven now, and that's old enough to take accountability. Tell Lord Arvill what you saw."

James' chest fluttered anxiously as he glanced between Mrs. Harvey and Jacob. Meanwhile, Nora simply curled tighter into herself and stared off into the distance.

Eventually, with a lot of patience that James didn't really want to offer, he managed to coax Jacob into speaking. "I promise you won't be in any trouble for telling me the truth," he said softly, "What's important is that you're honest and tell me everything important. All right?"

Jacob's gaze flickered up to his mother, lips parting. It wasn't *him* that Jacob was afraid of, James realized, but Mrs. Harvey. He felt a little twinge of sympathy for the poor boy and reached up to put a hand on his shoulder. Perhaps it was crossing a line of familiarity, but James needed him to know that it was *all right*.

"I should go," Nora said softly then. Perhaps she thought that Jacob could be enticed to talk if there were fewer people around; or perhaps she simply couldn't bear to hear what he had to say. Taking a deep breath, she slid from her stool and vanished into the hall.

And it worked, too. With James' gentle reassurance and Nora's departure, Jacob finally spoke. "I didn't know it would hurt her," he murmured into his hands, "Lord Arvill said to put it in the tea when nobody was looking, and it just looked like a little bag of tea, so I didn't think... I didn't think it would do anything bad!"

James' heart stuttered. Lord Arvill? That meant *Edwin*. For a moment he couldn't even speak, the words catching in his throat. Just what was he trying to do? "It looked like tea," James repeated, "What exactly did Lord Arvill give you?"

Jacob shrugged, but by now he was so hunched in on himself that he could barely even move. "It looked like that loose tea that you like, my lord. He- he said that it was just something to make it taste better, but if I didn't put it in the tea then he'd fire Mama. So, I thought I *had* to do it, because if I didn't then she'd lose her job and- and I didn't want to be the reason Mama had to leave!"

Beside him, Mrs. Harvey stiffened. She was so red now that she looked fit to pass out, eyes narrowing dangerously. "Jacob," she said lowly, "what did you give her?"

"I don't know what it was," he insisted, "but I did it for you, Mama. Lord Arvill said you'd never find another job again if I didn't." Fresh tears bubbled in his eyes, and with a wail he dropped his head into his palms and began to sob.

James didn't know what to do. His chest hammered, pulse ringing in his ears, and he felt sick to his stomach. Edwin was behind this the entire time? Except, what reason did he have for poisoning Alicia? They had barely interacted since James had told him not to make her uncomfortable. In fact, he had the distinct impression that Alicia avoided him as much as possible; but avoidance wasn't reason enough to *poison* someone.

Unless... unless it wasn't made for Alicia. The second theory, buried so deep in James' mind that he could hardly bring himself to think it, made his blood go cold. What if the tea was meant for James? Hadn't he given Alicia his cup because she spilled her own drink? Hadn't he planned to take tea alone, until they decided to go on a walk together?

"...My lord?"

James snapped back to attention with a grunt, turning his wide gaze to Mrs. Harvey. "Yes?"

She shifted from foot to foot as James stood, her gaze following him as he began to tower above her portly frame. She looked meek now, so unlike her strong and sensible self. Her face, once red, had gone pale. "Jacob didn't mean any harm, my lord. He didn't know the stuff would hurt her, and he was put in an impossible position-

"I'm aware of that," James replied. Despite the thunder of his pulse, his voice somehow came out calm. He took a breath and squeezed his eyes shut, praying silently that he had somehow got this wrong. If only he had misunderstood, and this was all some ridiculous case of making assumptions. He knew, though, that this was all true.

When he cracked his eyes open again, Mrs. Harvey was standing by the enormous table used for preparing meals. Her hands were clenched into fists, and she was practically trembling. "He's just a boy. If you want to punish him, my lord, do whatever you think is necessary - but let us continue to work for you."

"I promised that he wouldn't be in trouble," James said. His voice echoed, dreamlike, in the enormous kitchen. It hardly even seemed to come from him at all; there was a disconnect somewhere in his mind that made everything seem unreal. James half expected to wake up, alone in his bed, and find that this had all been an awful dream. He wished that were the case.

Mrs. Harvey relaxed - and then she glared harsh enough to send Jacob scrambling from the room. "Thank you, my lord," she murmured, "I'll see to it that the boy is adequately punished." Then she, too, hurried from the room.

Now alone, the full weight of the truth came crashing into James like a real, tangible force. He gasped for air and doubled over, feeling sickness rise in his gut - but there was nothing to throw up. Instead, he stood there for a moment, hands braced on the table tight enough to turn his knuckles white and forced himself to breathe.

To think, he had seen Edwin not an hour ago before he went to Agatha's. Oh, *Agatha*. He had accused her of terrible things, shouted at her and called her such horrible names... and it was his own brother that had been the culprit this entire time. It hurt his heart to think that he had been so needlessly cruel to an innocent woman. An innocent *friend*.

And the entire time, Edwin had played naïve. Pretended not to know what was wrong, when it was entirely his fault. Whether the tea had been for Alicia or James didn't matter; because Edwin had hurt the one person that James had been able to rely on. The one person he loved.

He had to find Edwin. *Now*. And get the truth from his own lips. Steadying himself, James stormed from the kitchen. The hallway was still unlit, but it didn't stop him from striding through without stopping, appearing in the foyer, and turning to march upstairs.

The grand staircase was drafty and cold at night, too much open space leaving it chilly even on the best of nights. James shivered as he walked, arms wrapped around himself, but didn't stop until he was at the top.

He half expected to see Edwin standing by Alicia's bedroom door, lurking there like some kind of monster or devil, waiting for her last

moments to come. Except the guest wing was empty, the doors all firmly closed, with no Edwin in sight. This was an enormous manor with over a hundred rooms; Edwin could have been in any one of them.

He could have fled, like the coward he was, but James couldn't bear the thought of that. No, Edwin was here somewhere.

Doctor Ashburn slipped from the room as James was walking past; he looked exhausted, with heavy circles beneath his lidded eyes and a pinched expression on his narrow face. Ashburn had been the Arvill's physician for a long time, but this was the first time in years that he had been called to something where he couldn't do anything to help. The last time they'd summoned him, it had been for father's death, and he had already passed when Doctor Ashburn got here.

"Any news?" James asked, although he didn't expect much.

Doctor Ashburn shook his head. "She wakes in fits and starts, but never for long enough to say much. Her breathing is getting worse, and she's starting to tremble. I fear she might start going into convulsions."

James felt a fresh rush of hatred towards Edwin. How could he have done something so awful, to such a beautiful and kind woman? Alicia had never done anything to hurt him, or anyone. It *should* have been James to drink the poison, as intended, and he wished that he had drank his tea instead of offering it to poor Alicia. "Isn't there anything you can do?"

A shrug. "I could try to induce vomiting, to get the poison out of her system; but without knowing the exact poison I can't administer treatment, only ease the symptoms."

It was the exact opposite of what James wanted to hear, and his stomach dropped. "Thank you, Doctor," he murmured helplessly, "you haven't seen my brother, have you?"

"I'm afraid not, my lord."

He still needed to find Edwin... but first, he wanted to see Alicia. For all he knew, this was the last time he'd have that chance. "I know it isn't proper, but could I see her? Just for a moment."

Although Doctor Ashburn's features remained stoic, he relaxed just a touch. "Of course."

When James saw her lying there in the bed, he almost wished he hadn't come inside. She was deathly pale, chest rising and falling in rapid gasps as she struggled to breathe. Her forehead was damp with sweat, but the rest of her was bone dry. When he settled by the end of her bed and placed a cool hand on her overheating forehead, she flinched.

Then, her eyes flickered open.



Alicia wavered in and out of consciousness, but never for long enough to piece together what was going on. She felt her heart flutter against her ribs like a baby bird, weak and slow. She came to for just long enough to hear voices in the hall, to glimpse a dark figure by her door before she was dragged under once again.

The next time she awoke, it was with a shuddering jolt as something cold touched her stomach. She tried to move, but her limbs felt heavy, and she couldn't seem to control them. Her eyes tried to open, and she saw the dark figure of an elderly man in a doctor's coat looming over her.

The third time, there was complete and perfect silence. The room was dark, not a single drop of light filtered through behind her eyelids. She stirred, feeling her lungs ache with the effort of the movement, and tipped her head to the side. That was when she heard the gentle rise and fall of someone's breathing, but it wasn't her own struggling rasps. It sounded like *James*, and how she knew that by his breathing was a mystery, but somehow, she knew it was him.

A cool hand touched her forehead. Then it reached down and squeezed her own slender hand. It was damp with sweat - or was it her own? - but that gentle little movement filled her with relief. He was here, by her bedside. Did that mean she was going to be all right? Surely, he had better things to do than worry about his sickly governess, and she was fine anyway.

No, you're not, a part of her criticized, don't act like this is normal.

Then her mind began to drift again, exhaustion tugging her back into unconsciousness. She fought it, struggling to flutter her eyes open and turned to look at James. For a moment all she saw was darkness; but bit by bit, she began to focus. He had pulled up a chair to her bedside, his tall frame leaning over the bed as he held her hand. Little by little, the details of him began to float into view. His hair was a disaster, sticking to his forehead in a way that made him look somehow childlike. Messy. Not like a proper lord should have looked. It was endearing, though, to see him so clearly distressed over her.

His bright blue eyes fixed on Alicia as she stirred. A gasp escaped his lips, as if he had never expected to see her move. "You're awake," he murmured, "Oh Alicia, I'm so sorry that this happened."

But what, exactly, had happened? Alicia tried to ask, but the words caught in her throat and her entire body screamed at her not to try. Her lungs felt fit to burst, but when she tried to suck down air it felt like she was getting nothing at all. She was all too aware of how her entire body trembled with each breath.

"Don't try to move too much," James insisted quietly, "Keep your strength. I promise, I'll find out what this is and then Doctor Ashburn can administer a cure."

Alicia tried to smile, but her face wouldn't cooperate. Her entire body felt like it was burning, but it was worst in her abdomen, where her organs all seemed to be fighting to lurch free of her body. When she tried to speak again, no words came out, and her whole body lit up in agonizing heat - but no matter how bad it was, her body didn't react. She still lay there, limbs limp and unmoving.

Somehow, that was even worse than the pain. Being too weak to even react to it.

"I know who did this," James murmured now, "and I'm going to stop him. It was Edwin, he poisoned the tea, but it was meant to be for me... God knows what he was thinking." James sucked in a breath, and it sounded like he wanted to cry.

Oh, how Alicia wanted to reach out to him. Her mind was so cloudy that she could barely think, but she knew he was hurting. He didn't deserve it. Not a sweet, wonderful man like him.

Somehow, with barely a flick of her wrist, she managed to squeeze his hand right back. His gaze snapped to her, wide and watery, but Alicia was already beginning to slip back into that dark unconsciousness.

Maybe it was her imagination; but as she drifted away, she thought she heard someone say *I love you*.

Chapter Twenty-Three

When James slipped from Alicia's bedroom, it was with renewed determination lighting a fire in his chest. He *was* going to find Edwin; and Edwin was going to pay for what he did.

It took a long time to track him down. As the night stretched on and the world got darker, it was easier for Edwin to slink around unnoticed or hide somewhere that James would never think to look. He didn't try to hide, though, which was the odd thing - James found him in the rose gardens, sipping from a glass of white wine as he admired the beautiful rose bushes surrounding him.

It was almost as if he was celebrating. He hadn't even hurt the one he wanted to, but apparently ruining Alicia's life and nearly *killing her* was a reason to celebrate.

"Edwin," James said coldly, "this is where you've been hiding?"

Edwin's blue gaze flickered up. He sat on one of the elegantly carved wooden benches; the very same one that James and Alicia had sat on together. "Not hiding," he said coolly, "just enjoying the wonderful night. What do you want?"

"What I *want*, is for you to tell me what poison you used in that tea. That poor cook's boy, Jacob, was in fits thinking it was his fault Alicia was sick! But it was all *you*, threatening him and acting like it was *nothing* when I told you Alicia had fallen ill." He strode forward, jabbed an accusing finger Edwin's way. "You're disgusting, do you know that? Cruel and awful - and look at you, you're not even ashamed of it. You hurt someone innocent because of your carelessness. Do you even have a conscience?"

Edwin's features began to waver, but not in guilt. His lips twisted into a snarl, hands going stiff by his sides. Ever so slowly, he set down the glass. "Why should I feel guilty? It's true that the poison wasn't meant for young Alicia - but it's only a little mishap on my part."

Mishap. That was it? He thought it was some innocent accident, like misplacing an item or forgetting someone's birthday? God, he was even more disgusting than James thought; and he wasn't even *denying* it. The brutal honesty was most painful of all. "This isn't a mishap; this is a woman's life you're playing with. How could you be so heartless?"

"Well, the poison was meant for you, not her. But now that it's all out in the open it doesn't even matter."

"Doesn't matter? She could *die*." James leaned forward and snatched Edwin by the collar of his shirt. Edwin didn't even try to struggle as James hauled him upright and stared him down with narrow, dark eyes. "Why would you do this in the first place? What have I done, that means I was supposed to die?"

Edwin's face darkened. His entire body went *rigid*, and James had never seen him so angry in all his life. "What did you do?" he asked with an eerie calm, even as his face twisted in disgust, "You did *everything*. You were always father's favorite; you got his favor, his title, the *manor*. And now you've even got Alicia. You've gotten everything in life handed to you while I was left in the background, in *your* shadow. James Arvill, everybody's favorite. While I had to pick up your scraps and admit that it's all I'd ever get."

James' heart thudded against his ribs like it was trying to break free. He felt sick and his mind reeled. There was no way that this was truly happening. Did Edwin really think that he wanted this? "I only got father's title because he *died*, Edwin. What kind of trade is that? A meaningless title and an empty house, in return for my father's death? I didn't ask for that. Nobody could have predicted how father would die."

"Except I did, James! I did because I was the one that killed him." Edwin's face twisted into a look of sheer *mania*, his eyes going wide until the blue of his iris was dwarfed by the white surrounding it. "I'd had enough of being ignored and neglected, treated like less. So, I pushed him down the stairs and watched as he landed in a broken heap right at the bottom. And do you know what? He deserved it."

James couldn't breathe. He wanted to scream, but his lungs were empty. Edwin... he killed their father because he didn't feel *special* enough? What kind of awful, twisted mind came up with something so revolting? Edwin had kept this to himself for all these years... was this

why he travelled so much; to keep the truth of his murder a well-kept secret.

Now that Edwin had started speaking, he couldn't seem to stop. Words tumbled from his lips in a jumbled mess of half-finished thoughts. "But I didn't think. When he died, you got everything, and once again I was shoved to the back of everyone's thoughts. All anybody cared about was how *you* were grieving; how difficult it must have been to raise your siblings. Nobody spared a thought to how I was coping with it all." His hands clenched, knuckles white, and he shoved James. *Hard*. "Then Alicia came along, and I thought she was so pretty - but as always, you had to have what you want."

Alicia. James hadn't done anything except give her a job and try to make her happy. He had never acted on his feelings, shoving them deep down inside... but Edwin didn't care. He saw what he wanted to, used it as fuel for this self-sabotaging fantasy that everyone hated him. Well, by admitting all of this he had ensured that hatred was all anyone would ever feel for him again.

"You always get what you want, James, but you can't if you're dead. I'm lucky that hemlock is so easy to come by in these woods out back."

Hemlock. James' heart stuttered in relief, and he let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. It left him all in a rush and his head spun, but then he turned to Edwin with an icy stare. "You're coming inside, and you're going to tell the doctor exactly what and how much you gave Alicia."

"You can't make me-"

James' fists curled around Edwin's collar, and it was tight enough to make him gasp. The adrenaline thundering through his veins gave him enough strength to haul Edwin past the rose gardens and out onto the path. Edwin struggled and writhed, hands clambering at James' grasp, but it was no use. James simply used his other hand to clamp around Edwin's arms and towed him back toward the house.

"Doctor Ashburn?" he called into the quiet house. Most of the staff must have been asleep, but James didn't care. All that mattered was making sure Alicia was safe. "Doctor Ashburn, I know what Alicia drank. It was hemlock!"

As they struggled to tread upstairs, James still dragging Edwin behind him, Doctor Ashburn appeared in the hallway. He had a lamp in his thin hands, illuminating the paleness of his wrinkled face. "Hemlock?" he murmured, eyes shifting from one man to the next, "And it was Lord Arvill here who did it?"

"Yes, he admitted everything."

"Then I'll get to Miss Sempill right away." He paused then, brows furrowed. "I should make you aware that there is no cure for hemlock poisoning, but I've managed to get the worst of it out of her already. I can prescribe treatments that will help Miss Sempill through, but she'll need to do the rest of the work herself, my lord."

James shuddered, his stomach dropping. "I understand. Thank you, Doctor Ashburn."

"How much did you give her?" His pale gaze turned to Edwin, who continued to twist and writhe.

Edwin only shrugged. "However much that stupid child deemed was enough. I hope it was the whole damn packet!"

With a coldness spreading through his chest, James hauled Edwin backwards and strode back towards the stairs. "Summon the authorities," he called to whoever was listening, "and tell them that Lord Edwin Arvill has poisoned our governess."

It took a long time to get Edwin into the study - where James threw him down onto the nearest chair without care. He landed with a *thud* and almost toppled to the ground, and he only managed to steady himself because the chair was so sturdy. "It should have been you," Edwin snapped, "but you always have to win, don't you?"

Win. It was as if he thought that having the woman he loved poisoned, and knowing his own brother was behind it, was supposed to be the *good* outcome here. James said nothing as he slammed the study door, then came to sit by Edwin's side. If he tried to get away, James wouldn't hesitate to grab him again.

"She's a sweet girl, that Alicia," Edwin continued with a scowl, "she doesn't deserve this. If you think about it, it's your own fault for giving her your teacup. Jacob only put the hemlock in after your cup was

poured."

So that was why the tea had arrived already poured. James felt bile rise in the back of his throat, but he swallowed it down. It tasted sour. "Everything here is your fault, Edwin. You've nothing to blame but your own selfishness. You know, I blamed my best friend for all of this, because it never even entered my *head*, that it would be you. This whole time, you've acted like the perfect big brother to Samuel and Jenny. Pretended to grieve over father's death. But *you* killed him."

Edwin scowled. He didn't even try to run; why? Had he accepted that this was it, or was he simply too angry to even know what waited for him? "I grieved too," he muttered then, "I loved father, even if he acted like I wasn't there. He doted on you for being the oldest, and he loved the children because they were young and sweet. The middle child is always ignored - but that doesn't mean I wanted him to die-"

"Yet *you* killed him?" James had always thought that *seeing red* was some silly phrase that didn't really mean a thing. Now, he knew just how literal it was. His vision dimmed as anger filled his chest, and it took every last *shred* of self-restraint not to leap across the desk and shove Edwin to the ground. Every fiber of him felt hot and he had to clamp his hands onto the arms of the seat to keep from tearing at his skin.

Edwin, by contrast, seemed to deflate. He shrank before James' eyes, sinking deeper and deeper into the chair until his legs splayed out before him. "I had to," he murmured, "you gave me no choice. It was the only way to make him stop; to make *you* stop. But after he was gone, things only got worse. You got more attention than ever, so I left."

"Then you decided to come back and kill me too." James finished. "What about Jenny and Samuel? If you'd killed me, what would have happened to them?"

"Nothing would have *changed* without you," Edwin insisted quietly, but there was no more enthusiasm in his voice. He sounded as empty as James felt. "I'd have taken on the marquess title and carried on without you. The children would have still had Alicia, except she would have fallen in love with *me* instead."

How ridiculous. James might have laughed at the absurdity, had he

not felt so physically ill. His hands clenched tighter, until it *hurt*, but he couldn't let go of the chair for fear of what he might do otherwise. Through gritted teeth, he managed to utter, "You're despicable. I hope you know that, and I hope that the knowledge tears you apart inside."

Edwin only sighed and said, "I did what I had to. Now I'll deal with the consequences."

Somehow, his utter acceptance drained every last drop of anger from James' body, and he was left with nothing but the creeping exhaustion slowly taking over his entire self.



The night watchmen arrived an hour later; they strode into the manor with stern scowls and harsh words and took James' account of what happened. They spared no niceties because he was a marquess, getting right to the point before turning to address Edwin.

"So, you killed your own father?" One, a tall and slender man, asked. "And then tried to poison your own brother? Here I thought the Arvill's already had enough going on." He tilted his head. "No offense meant, Lord Arvill."

"None taken." To be fair, they were right. It seemed that this house held nothing but cruelty. It was just one disaster after another - a never-ending stream of malice. It hurt his heart to know that his own brother was the *cause* of most of that. He could barely even look at Edwin as the night watchmen hauled him into the foyer.

To his credit, Edwin didn't try to fight as the officers hauled him away. "I only did what I had to," he echoed from earlier, turning an accusing glare to James. "This is your fault; you led me to do this."

The same man raised a brow. He hadn't introduced himself, except to say that he was the night watchman and here to help. Now, he was staring down at Edwin with a look of contempt - and it was strange to see that look aimed at someone else. James was so used to people turning that horrid gaze onto *him*.

"He means because he hates me," James muttered. It seemed more and more difficult to talk as the night progressed, exhaustion settling in his skull and making the back of his eyes ache. All he wanted was to

collapse into bed and pass out for days.

The watchman shrugged. "Well, we'll take care of him. Seems to me like there's a whole story here, lord."

"There certainly is."

Just as they had arrived, the watchmen left without much fuss. They vanished into the night, dragging a half-crazed Edwin with them, but even then, it was without fanfare.

Edwin, though, did turn around one last time to glare at James as he was swallowed up by the darkness. "Just remember," he snapped, "you've nobody to blame but yourself. Maybe I'll be in prison - but *you* have to deal with the fallout!"

Then Archie shut the great doors and Edwin was gone.

Silence stretched throughout the house; it was so silent, in fact, that all James could hear was the rasping of his own breath. He didn't speak - because what was there to say? Edwin was gone, but it didn't really fix anything. Alicia was still sick, father was still dead, and now James had to deal with the dawning realization that his own family had been behind it the entire time.

Archie strode over, a reassuring smile on his elderly face. "Perhaps you should try to rest, my lord. It's late, and you've had a stressful day. Maybe things will appear better after a full night's sleep."

James sucked in a breath - and released it shakily. He had hoped that it would make him feel better, but it only served to make his stomach churn. "Thank you, Archie," he managed to reply, ever so cool and calm. He turned, intending to go upstairs and collapse in his bedroom, but his legs didn't seem to work. They were frozen, unable to move, as he tried to take a step forward. His entire body felt like jelly, unresponsive and weak.

Archie put a hesitant hand on James' arm, steadying him. It was blurring the boundary between *employee* and *friend*, but in that moment, James didn't care if it was appropriate or not. That kind, fatherly touch was welcome. "I'm so sorry," Archie murmured, "to think, that your brother was behind the late Lord Arvill's death this entire time. I can't imagine what you're going through, my lord, but

you have my support should you ever need it. Miss Sempill's too, I know. That woman would do anything for you."

James' heart stuttered, but it didn't bring him any joy. "If she pulls through," James replied softly.

"Doctor Ashburn is a wonderful physician, and Miss Sempill is a strong, healthy young woman." Archie paused, a smile creeping onto his face. "I have every faith that she will be fine."

That, at least, brought a flicker of hope in his chest. If Archie believed it, then so did he. "Thank you, Archie. You always know just what to say."

"I've been on this earth for a long time, my lord, and I've learned a lot in my years in your service."

James smiled, just a touch, and let out a sigh. "I think I'll go to bed, then. Perhaps I'll check on Alicia before I do."

"A splendid idea."

They said goodnight, and then James was wandering up the stairs alone. It had been easier, with Archie, to pretend that everything was all right; but as he crept down the darkened hallway, shivering in the drafty chill, it hit him all at once. One moment he was fine - and the next, James was doubled over in the middle of the hallway, eyes squeezed shut as he tried to muffle his sobs with the sleeve of his shirt.

His heart felt like it was being torn from his chest, lungs aching with every breath. When he thought of Edwin, it was with a spark of disgust so strong that James physically reeled back, sickness rising in his gut.

Betrayed by his own brother. His father, murdered. The woman he loved, unconscious and sick. Everything crumbled around him, and James couldn't be strong any longer.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Alicia rolled over in the bed, bleary eyes blinking open. The first thing she noticed was the heaviness in her body; like she had been stuffed with rocks. When she tried to lift her arm, she only managed to raise it a few inches from the mattress before it flopped uselessly back against the bed.

Her legs were a little more cooperative, shifting beneath the covers so she could shuffle higher onto the pillows stacked around her. Even so, she felt heavy and weak in a way she had never experienced before, and it made her heart thud anxiously against her ribs.

The room was dark, although sunlight peeked through a gap in the curtains to shed a thin beam across the end of the bed. The rest of the room was just how she'd left it; one of her dresses was laid neatly over the desk chair, with her shoes tucked into the corner. The trunk she had arrived with was still not completely unpacked, but she had made sure that it was kept out of the way, lid closed. The room hardly looked lived in, mostly because Alicia spent so little time actually in it.

Except for now, apparently. The light streaming from the curtains indicated it was midday, so why was she still in bed? Had nobody come to wake her? Even on a weekend, free from the classroom, she rarely slept in past seven o'clock. She didn't remember going to bed late, because she had tea with James and then went to the library to find a new book. Then...

After that, her memories were blank. Had she taken a book back to her room? When had she eaten supper? With a jolt, Alicia realized that she didn't remember anything past the moment she had stepped out of the library.

Something was wrong. *Very* wrong. She tried to sit up, but her arms refused to support her, and she flopped back against the cushions gracelessly. A small gasp left her lips as pain shot through her left temple - but her body refused to react to it. Even that simple attempt

to sit up left her exhausted, lungs burning from the effort.

Alicia felt panic rising in her chest, but no matter how much she twisted and turned, she couldn't sit up. Her entire body felt drained of life, as if she was only a husk of a person. What had happened? Why couldn't she remember last night?

The bedroom door creaked open, revealing a thin streak of light from the hall. Then a tall, thin figure stepped into view. He was an older man - not as old as Archie, but at least forty. He didn't smile as he strode over to the bed - but when they locked eyes, his lips managed a small twitch. "You're awake, Miss Sempill?"

"Who are you?" she managed to splutter out. Her throat felt like sandpaper and her mouth was worse. "What happened to me?"

He winced, then. "You don't remember? Maybe that's for the best." There was a chair by her bedside, and the man settled into it with a heaving sigh. "I'm Doctor Ashburn, I've been caring for you while you've been unconscious. I'm afraid that the last few days have been quite chaotic, miss. You were poisoned, although the poison was meant for Lord Arvill, not you."

Her heart stuttered, breath catching. Something sparked in Alicia's mind, collapsing in a dark hallway, someone rushing to her aid. The pain in her chest as she tried to stand, unable to ask for help.

Wincing, she burrowed deeper into the bed sheets.

"You're weak right now, and you haven't eaten for a few days; but if you rest and have something to eat, you should make a full recovery. You're an incredibly strong young woman."

But Alicia didn't care about that. *Poisoned?* How - and why - would someone try to poison James? She knew that he wasn't the most loved person in town, but for someone to try and *kill him*... and then to poison her instead? It was too much, and her mind exploded with a million different questions all mingling together.

"I'm sure Lord Arvill will explain everything once you're back to full health," Doctor Ashburn said calmly, "but for now, it's best you rest. I'll have someone bring you a light meal, something you can keep down." He reached over to the bedside table, which was just as

enormously oversized as the rest of the furniture in this manor. When he settled back, it was to place a glass of cool water into Alicia's hands. "Try to drink all of this, but in slow sips. All right?"

Alicia didn't have much hope; but this time, her arms decided to cooperate. She managed to awkwardly raise the glass to her lips and take a long, slow drink. Her hands wobbled with the effort, but it *worked*, and she felt a little twinge of pride.

Doctor Ashburn retrieved the glass and placed it back on the table. "Excellent. See? Stronger already."

She managed a weak smile, even as her mind continued to swirl with questions. "Strong enough to see James?" she asked - only to grimace as she realized her own words. James, not Lord Arvill.

Doctor Ashburn either didn't notice or didn't care, though, because he simply shook his head and gestured to the bed. "You need to rest, first. Perhaps after you've eaten, you can have visitors."

Reluctantly, Alicia agreed. It wasn't as if she had much choice, the state she was in. Her arms felt like lead and her whole body ached. Not to mention how grimy she felt, which made sense if she'd been unconscious and lying in one spot for two days.

God, she thought, two days. Whatever happened, I must have missed all of it. Perhaps I should be glad for that. She shuddered at the thought.

"Now, get some rest and I'll be back soon," Doctor Ashburn said with a faint smile, "try not to exert yourself."

He slipped from the room a moment later, letting the door fall shut on his way out. Yet Alicia knew that she couldn't fall back asleep - not until she knew what was going on. Her body was too exhausted to move, though, so she simply had to wait.

Alicia had never hated waiting so much in her life, until now.



A knock at the study door alerted James to another presence. "Come in," he said hurriedly, eyes darting upward. He expected to see Archie,

because he had asked Agatha to come around for a proper apology, but it wasn't the kindly doorman that opened the study door.

It was Doctor Ashburn, looking happier than James had ever seen him. Although considering his usual calm expression and carefully composed exterior, seeing him happy at all was a rarity. "Lord Arvill," he said, sliding into the room and closing the door, "I believe I have good news."

His heart skipped. "You do? Please, take a seat and tell me everything." If it pertained to Alicia, he wanted to know every little detail about her recovery. Doctor Ashburn had been so certain that she would recover fully, and James had been not so patiently waiting for updates ever since. He couldn't help but shuffle to the edge of his seat as the doctor sat down.

He didn't quite *smile*, exactly; but Doctor Ashburn's features relaxed just slightly. The harshness of his brow receded, and the set of his jaw didn't look quite so stern. "Miss Sempill is awake," he said after a moment, "and she's weak, yes, but doing much better than even I anticipated."

Relief washed over him, and James let out a heavy sigh. "Thank goodness," he managed, "I was so worried... do you think she's well enough for a visit?"

Ashburn *did* smile then - it was just a quirk of his lips, really, barely noticeable, and yet somehow it left James gaping in surprise. "You know," Doctor Ashburn mused, "she asked to see you too when she first woke up. I don't wish to intrude, my lord, but can I assume that you have certain *feelings* towards the young Miss Sempill?"

James' cheeks flushed pink, but he didn't try to deny it. His lips parted, but sound simply refused to come out. Instead, he only floundered, wishing that he could at least say *something*.

Meanwhile, Doctor Ashburn simply shook his head and said, "It's none of my business, I understand that. But if I may impart some advice?"

James only nodded dumbly.

"There's nothing like a near death experience to make people realize how they feel." He rose a brow. "So, if there was ever a time to tell

Miss Sempill, it would be now."

James didn't know what to do with that information. He simply stared, still trying to force some sort of coherent sentence past his lips. Eventually he stammered, "Do you think so?"

"I do." He nodded sagely, like it was the most obvious answer in the world. Then he gestured to the door with a sweep of one slender hand and asked, "May I be excused? I'd like for Miss Sempill to have something to eat, but I should inform the cooks of exactly what her fragile body needs."

"Yes, of course." James excused him. Then he stood, taking in a deep breath, and followed Doctor Ashburn out. If he couldn't see Alicia just yet, he could visit the children in the playroom. Yesterday, he had briefly explained why Edwin was gone, and what had happened to Alicia... but with everything going on, they deserved more than a watered-down excuse and then to be left alone to deal with it themselves.

And since there was no sign that Agatha wanted to come, well, there was no point in waiting for her. Perhaps they needed some time apart before he tried to force an apology on her.

James found the two exactly where he thought they'd be. Jenny sat with a book on her lap, muttering quietly as she followed each paragraph with her finger. Samuel sat beside her, although he seemed to be paying less attention to the book and more to the wooden soldier in his hands.

"Jenny," James said softly, "I didn't know you liked to read. I thought Miss Sempill had to fight with you to get reading done during class?"

Her gaze flickered up, blue eyes fixed on his. "I don't *like it*," she replied in a voice just as soft, "but Miss Sempill says I should practice. I want her to see how good I've gotten when she wakes up." She offered a smile, but it was watery. Tears shone in her eyes but didn't quite fall.

"I think that's very thoughtful," he replied softly, "I'm sure Alicia will be delighted to see the effort you've been putting in."

Jenny's eyes lit up - and at first, he thought it was because of the

compliment. Then she blurted, "You called her Alicia! Does that mean you're friends now?"

Ah. James felt that flush reappear across his cheeks, but he didn't reply right away. *Friends*. Could they have been described as such? He liked to think so; but Alicia was still his employee. Even so, he liked to think they were friends. He simply wished they could be more.

Can I assume that you have certain feelings towards the young Miss Sempill? Doctor Ashburn's question rose in his mind, made his chest skip a beat. When he thought of it that way, it was obvious that he hadn't done a very good job of hiding his feelings.

With a hesitant smile, James reached out to ruffle Jenny's hair. "I think she's more than a friend," he replied softly, "to all of us. I think... I think she's family."

Jenny beamed, and the last of her tears faded away. "Family," she announced, "she is, isn't she?"

James only smiled back, feeling his heart lighten. Edwin was gone and he had left damage in his wake; but perhaps they were already on their way to healing.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Alicia stared at herself in the floor length mirror, fussing with a persistent strand of hair that simply refused to stay in its braid. Even after a thorough wash, taking the time to get the knots and grease out of her hair, she didn't feel quite herself yet. She thought that perhaps putting her hair in a familiar style would help bring some normalcy back, but when she stared at that long, thick braid of hair, all Alicia could think of was how it looked so strange against the pallor of her skin.

She had always been pale to begin with, but now she looked downright *ghostly*. Still, at least the pale purple of her dress helped disguise some of her paleness; most of her dresses were practical blues or grays, and she had tried on two before deciding that it simply made her look *deathly*.

There was a knock at the door, so faint that at first, she thought it was her imagination. Then Nora poked her head through and said, "Lord Arvill is waiting for you in the dining room. He says to take your time, there's no rush."

Alicia smiled. "Thank you. I'll be down soon." Then, "Oh, Nora? Could you help me with something?"

Nora's smile was soft and kind. It was the smile not of a maid, but a friend eager to help. "Of course. What do you need, miss?"

Alicia rose a brow, watching Nora in the reflection of the mirror. "How many times? Alicia, please."

"Then what do you need, Alicia?" Nora's smile widened bashfully.

"I can't quite get my hair right. Would you mind braiding it for me?" She gestured to her head, where that annoying little strand poked out of the top of the braid. "I suppose my hands aren't as dexterous as they used to be." She glanced down at the hands in question, which were

clasped loosely. Even relaxed, they shook now. Doctor Ashburn said that it wouldn't last forever, but she was beginning to doubt.

Seeing Nora's delighted expression, though, made it a little more bearable. She ushered Alicia over to the bed, where they both perched on the end, side by side. "What would you like?" Nora asked, beginning to unwind the long braid. Heavy strands of hair fell across Alicia's shoulders, and Nora ran a hand through the strands. "You have such lovely hair," she said quietly, "wouldn't you like something more than just a braid?"

Alicia shrugged. "It's all I ever do, except for low buns. What do you suggest?"

Nora hummed. "Do you have a ribbon?"

"In the vanity, top drawer. Why?"

It became obvious soon, as Nora wound a bright pink ribbon through Alicia's hair. She braided it with the utmost care, then twisted the braid around the back of Alicia's head to create a beautiful, intricate bun interlaced with pink. It was beautiful, and unique, and Alicia didn't know where Nora had gotten the idea - but when she looked in the mirror and saw herself, Alicia was lost for words.

"Now, you'd better get down to Lord Arvill before he thinks you've ran away," Nora said lightly, "It isn't every day that he asks someone to dinner. Enjoy yourself Miss - uh, Alicia."

She couldn't help but smile as they parted ways. In the week since Edwin was arrested, things were slowly returning to normal. There was still a way to go, but... well, Alicia felt a little brighter knowing that James had invited her to dinner. It almost felt like she was really a part of the Arvill family.

She found him in the grand dining room, as promised. He sat at one end, not at the head of the table but rather directly across from the door, a few seats down. There was a second place set directly across from him, the seat already moved back to allow Alicia to sit.

His bright blue eyes flickered up as she entered. "Oh," he said breathlessly as his warm gaze swept across her face, "you look lovely."

Ducking her head, Alicia sat. "Only because Nora was kind enough to do this." She waved a hand across her head, gesturing to the intricate hairstyle that wound about the back of her.

"No," James said softly, and a nervous little smile spread across his lips, "you're beautiful because you're you."

Alicia didn't quite know what to say to that, and she felt a little stutter of relief as the food was served. Several maids entered, cutting through the tension and distracting Alicia from her nerves. There was a delicious, cooked ham big enough to feed a family, an array of vegetables of every color, and potatoes both roasted and mashed. The scent filled the room with its lovely, savory saltiness and Alicia couldn't help but stare as more plates were added to the table.

"There's so *much*," she gaped as a bowl of fluffy mashed potatoes were set down across from her. "Just for the two of us? What about Jenny and Samuel?"

James laughed, and when he smiled, little smile lines creased the corner of his lips. It was beautiful. "The children agreed to eat separately, so that we could have the evening to ourselves. Actually, it was Jenny's idea - she suggested that we should have an afternoon together, to celebrate your recovery."

Alicia's chest fluttered. Yes, she had walked through the gardens alone with James, shared tea, and company with nobody else around... but this was different. There was a whole meal just for them, beautifully prepared, and they were alone in the big old dining room. It felt, almost, like it was all leading up to something important.

What that was, though, was beyond her.

The butler smiled as he began to carve the ham; and Alicia hadn't spent a lot of time around the quiet man, yet she couldn't shake the feeling that he knew something she didn't. When the ham was carved into thin, delicate strips, he stood back and said, "Please, enjoy."

"Thank you," Alicia said as he left the room.

Silence settled over them after that, but it was a peaceful sort. Alicia piled her plate high with vegetables and ham, feeling her stomach growl as she took it all in. She had never eaten like this in her life; she

had always eaten simple food. Even the tasty food she had grown used to eating at the manor paled in comparison to this feast.

It was James who broke the silence first, as he served himself a helping of mashed potatoes. "You're probably wondering why I asked to have dinner with you," he said softly, "The last week has made me think, and I've been trying to put everything into perspective."

Quirking her brow, Alicia listened. She took a delicate bite of steamed green beans, enjoying the silky taste; but now her attention was focused on James. "What do you mean?"

"I was going out of my mind waiting for you to recover; I was worried sick, and it made me realize something... I lost my trust in my brother, but I've always been able to rely on you."

Alicia tilted her head, feeling a stray curl fall across her shoulder. Her heart skipped but she didn't reply; James was clearly trying to sort through his thoughts, and she wanted to give him room.

"This, it made me realize who the important people in my life are. Jenny, Samuel... and *you*." He looked at her from across the table, his blue eyes sparkling. "I thought you were going to die, Alicia, and I don't know what I would have done with myself if you had. You've... you've come to mean so much more to me than just a governess."

Alicia paused, fork halfway to her lips. Her mind stuttered and she couldn't seem to form a reply. It was as if words had simply ceased to exist. What did he mean, that she was more to him than just a governess? Did he mean... but surely not. No, Alicia couldn't let herself believe that this was some sort of confession.

Yet when James smiled at her, his cheeks flushed a beautiful cherry red, Alicia's heart fluttered. He reached across the table and took her hand gently in his own. "Alicia," he said softly, "I think I'm in love with you. No, I *know* I am - I've been in love with you for a long time, I just didn't let myself think about it until now."

This was too good to be true. Alicia gazed up at him, feeling how her heart thudded and her breath hitched. Suddenly, this beautiful meal all made sense - *this* was why James wanted them to be alone. It filled her heart with a whole new kind of gratitude, and she let out a musical laugh. "Oh James, do you mean it?"

"Of course, I do," he replied, and gave her hand a careful squeeze. The intimacy seemed to come so naturally to him, as if he had been desperate to hold her hand for so long and was *finally* able to. When he smiled, he was the most wonderful man that Alicia had ever seen. "I wouldn't lie about something like this, Alicia," he said softly, "I mean every word of what I say. I never... I never said anything before because I didn't know how you felt, but with everything that's happened, I can't keep my feelings to myself anymore. Unless..." he paused, features scrunching, "unless I've misjudged, and you don't feel the same?"

Alicia let out a startled little gasp, and suddenly the words rushed from her lips. "Of *course*, I feel the same - oh, I've felt the same since our very first walk through the gardens together. It's just... you're a lord. A marquess. I'm a *governess*, and I don't understand how you could ever fall for me."

"That's easy," James replied softly, "How could I not?"

A startled laugh escaped Alicia's lips, and for a long moment she couldn't think of a reply. The world had a dreamlike quality to it, the edges of her vision blurred as she stared at James' handsome face. *This can't be real*, she thought; yet as she looked at him, she knew that it was. How did she get so lucky?

"And another thing," he said softly - and then he was climbing to his feet, wandering around the side of the table to stop by her chair. He hesitated, hands shoved deep into his trouser pockets as he looked down at her with soft fondness. "I know this is sudden; but since I realized my feelings for you, Alicia, I knew I couldn't ignore them." When he removed his hands from their pockets, there was a tiny gray box in his right hand. "Alicia Sempill," he said, his face splitting into a radiant smile, "would you become my wife?"

When he flicked the box open, there was a beautiful silver ring inside. It was slender and delicate, set with tiny diamonds and a bright blue sapphire that almost matched the shade of James' eyes.

It was almost impossible to tear her gaze from the ring; but when she did, it was to see James' handsome face staring down at her, more shy than she'd ever seen him. Her lips parted, and a gasp fled her lips. "Oh," she murmured, feeling excitement swell inside of her, "Of course I will. James, I would love *nothing more* than to marry you!"

She wasn't sure who moved first - but suddenly she was in his arms, clinging to him like a lifeline. Her hands wound around his neck, and Alicia had to stand on her toes to reach him fully; but when their lips met, hesitant and shy, it was the best feeling in the entire *world*.

"I love you," James murmured against her lips, and it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

"I love you too."

Chapter Twenty-Six

James had a habit of floating about the house in a daze now; nothing held his attention, and all he could think about was the wedding. Sometimes that joy was dulled by the memory of Edwin, the knowledge that he wouldn't be in attendance when he and Alicia married. Then he thought of father, and how he should have been there too, and for a while his excitement was dampened with the reminder of all that had happened.

It was one of *those* days, as he stared out of the study window at the grounds outside. A drizzle of rain made the world outside look damp and gloomy, although the sun was beginning to peek out from the thick white clouds. James stared at them, lips tugged down into a scowl, mind drifting. There was so much to organize for the wedding, but his mind had fixed on one little problem.

Agatha. She hadn't come around when James had asked, and he had been too afraid to ask again. As time dragged on, he came to realize that this was turning out to be the end of their friendship. It hurt his heart to think of it that way; but how else was he supposed to take it?

With a dull sigh, James let his head sink into his hands. It felt cruel that father wouldn't be there, and now Agatha likely wouldn't come to the wedding, either. He had sent her a formal invitation of course, but if she didn't even want to visit, why would she come to his celebration?

He hated to admit it, but James knew what he had to do. If he wanted to fix things between them, he would have to take the first step. If Agatha wasn't going to visit him then he would visit her instead.

Gathering his energy and steeling his nerves, James strode into the foyer with his head held high. He wasn't going to let things continue on like this. "Archie," he said to the doorman, who was lingering at the bottom of the stairs, "could you arrange for a coach, as soon as possible."

Archie quirked a brow. "For anything specific, my lord?"

James nodded. "Yes. I'd like to visit Agatha."

"Right away, my lord."

With that done, James went to seek out Alicia. He had insisted that she didn't need to act as governess now that they were engaged, but she still enjoyed teaching the children at least two days a week. He found her upstairs in the classroom, a book open on her knee as she sat on the edge of the desk.

"Oh, James." She grinned when she caught his gaze. "We were just about to start a new book. Would you like to join?"

"Actually," he replied, stepping further into the room so he could take her hand, "I was hoping that we could take a ride?" He paused, then, unsure if he should even invite her to come with him at all. "I hate how I left things with Agatha, and I was hoping we could visit her together - to make amends."

He expected her to decline. James couldn't have blamed her; Agatha had been horribly rude, and then she had simply dropped out of their lives. But... well, he wished that they could be friends. Or at the very least, that all three of them could come to an understanding.

Yet Alicia surprised him with her enthusiastic nod, loose brunette curls spilling into her eyes. "Of course, I'd be honored. I know she doesn't exactly like me, but I hope we can all put it behind us."

Her willingness to forgive left James speechless, and he couldn't help but smile. He really didn't deserve her, did he? Plucking the book from her hands, he set it aside and said, "Thank you."

At his own desk, Samuel cleared his throat. "Does that mean lessons are finished for today?"

James and Alicia shared an amused look. "I suppose it does, yes."

"Then can I go downstairs?"

"Yes. Just stay out of trouble while we're gone."

Samuel beamed and hopped to his feet, almost tripping over the desk legs in the process. "Okay," he chirped, in a decisively *I make no promises* tone of voice. Jenny clambered upright too, and together they hurried from the room.

"They should be all right, shouldn't they?" Alicia asked with a muffled laugh.

"It won't be for long," James replied, then looped an arm around Alicia's waist. She fell against him easily, head resting on his shoulder, and he happily tucked her into his side. "Are you sure you want to do this?" he asked, referring to Agatha of course, "You don't have to come, just because I asked."

"I know," she replied, "but I want to. She's your closest friend, and you shouldn't end on terms like this. I know she was rude, but it's because she was hurting. Jealousy can do horrible things to a person, but I know you two can get past that."

He offered her a grateful smile, feeling his chest bloom with warmth. Alicia really was the kindest, warmest person he had ever met. James wouldn't have been surprised if she forgave Edwin, if given the chance. Yet he wasn't silly enough to mistake her kindness for naivety because she was also intelligent enough to know *exactly* what was going on around her.

"Would you like to go now?" Alicia asked; once again surprising him with her eagerness, "I'm sure Agatha will appreciate you making the effort to visit. She probably wants to speak with you, she's just afraid."

Afraid. Over the last few weeks, James had learned exactly what it meant to be *afraid*. It was time to move past that, though, and gather up all of his bravery to do what was right. So, with a deep breath and a smile, he nodded. "Let's go."

Giving him a squeeze, Alicia replied, "Whatever the outcome, I'm here for you."

And he knew, as surely as he loved her, that Alicia *was* there for him, no matter what.

As the coachman helped Alicia out of the carriage, she couldn't help but admire Agatha's beautiful home with its perfectly green grass that seemed to stretch on for miles. The road led past an enormous iron gate, designed to look as if intricate ivy was climbing up the bars and through a winding garden that eventually led to the manor itself. It was like a smaller version of James' manor, but with tall, narrow windows from floor to ceiling and a beautiful patio-like structure that spread out from the front door to one edge of the building.

It was easy to imagine Agatha, elegant and sophisticated, sitting out here in summer with a wide-brimmed hat, sipping wine or whatever it was that wealthy ladies drank when it was warm.

James linked their arms as they strode to the front door. He was warm despite the breeze, hands sweating nervously, but he didn't seem to notice. Or perhaps he just knew that there wasn't much he could do, save for fighting through his nerves.

They knocked and waited in tense silence. The pleasant breeze cooled the back of Alicia's neck, but it didn't seem to do much for poor James, who was flushed in the face and hopping from foot to foot. She had never seen him so nervous; but Agatha was his oldest and dearest friend, and neither of them knew what to expect. It would have been stranger if he *were* calm.

After a moment, the great doors crept open, revealing a beautiful foyer of white and blue. The beautiful staircase had a post on either side, decorated with white marble to look like two elegant cats were sitting there. Their eyes, painted a striking indigo, seemed to watch her as she and James walked inside.

"Lord Arvill," the doorman said, "and you must be Miss Sempill? We heard about your engagement. Congratulations."

"Thank you," Alicia replied, feeling her cheeks flush red.

"I will see if Lady Bennington would like to see you," the doorman continued, "Please, wait for her in the living room."

They were shown to a lovely living room, a fire already blazing. The walls were decorated with delicate baby blue wallpaper, and the thick gray carpet was so plush that Alicia swore she could feel it through her shoes. When they sat, the settee seemed to swallow them up.

They sat in tense silence for a long time, side by side yet not quite touching. James' gaze was fixed on the door, but Alicia took the time to let her gaze wander to the window.

The rain had stopped, at least, although the ground was still damp and the sky heavy with clouds. There were lighter, fluffier clouds to the north though, slowly floating closer and closer to town. Perhaps it would turn out to be a nice afternoon after all. It would certainly be welcomed.

The door creaked open, alerting Alicia to the presence of someone new. It was Agatha, of course, her blonde hair falling across her narrow shoulders. She hesitated in the doorway when she saw Alicia, but slowly crept in with a sheepish smile. "James," she said quietly, "you never said you were visiting."

He smiled, allowing Agatha a moment to sit and get comfortable before replying. "You didn't answer my last letter asking to see you, so I decided a surprise would be better." He shifted. "Is it. Better?"

Agatha let out a little sigh as she sank into the armchair across from them. The fire cast a gentle glow across her freckled skin, and Alicia had to admit that she looked beautiful. "I've been avoiding you," Agatha said simply, "as I'm sure you've guessed already. I *did* mean to reply, honestly, but I got so worried, and I didn't know what to say, so I ignored you. I'm sorry."

Alicia's gaze flickered between Agatha and James. Truthfully, she felt so much more out of place here than she had expected, sitting surrounded by the thick, tense awkwardness practically exuding from Agatha and James like a physical thing. Biting down on her lip, she waited for someone to continue.

But nobody did, and the silence stretched on - so Alicia took in a deep breath and took the initiative. "Agatha," she said slowly, finding her words, "James came to apologize, and to make amends; but I came too, because... well, because I would like to be your friend. If it's something that you want as well, of course."

Agatha's sea green eyes, so much like Alicia's own, crinkled at the corner when she smiled. It was a nervous little thing, but it lit up her whole face with hope. "You'd want us to be friends, even after those nasty things I said to you?"

Alicia shrugged, but she forced herself to hold Agatha's gaze despite the way her stomach twisted. "Nearly dying has put things into perspective for me, and I've come to the decision that life is too short to hold a grudge. Perhaps you *did* say some cruel things, but nobody is perfect, and I can tell you regret what you said."

"I do," she breathed quietly, "I've felt guilty every day since it happened."

Alicia smiled, small but genuine, as she leaned across to squeeze Agatha's shoulder. "Then I know that you and I can learn to get along. Perhaps not right away, but I know that we can be friends."

Beside her, James let out a shaky breath. She felt the stiffness in his arms as he reached to take her hands; but when they touched, he visibly relaxed. "Alicia is too good for the both of us," he said softly, "but she's right. I know that we can make things right, Agatha. We both acted terribly, but that doesn't mean our friendship has to end."

Agatha's lip wobbled, like she was fighting back the urge to cry. She blinked, too, and Alicia swore she saw the shine of unshed tears. "I really *am* sorry for what I said," she murmured, more to herself than anyone else. "I just... I saw how you two looked at each other, and I hated it; but I'm glad you're happy. After everything, you deserve that more than anyone."

Alicia's heart bloomed with warmth. "You deserve happiness too, Agatha. You'll find someone, someday."

"Perhaps the next wedding we go to will be yours," James added with a fond smile. "And I do hope that you'll come to ours. You received the invite?"

"I did. But after what you said to me that night... I wasn't sure if you really wanted to see me again, or if it was just a nicety."

James winced, turned his gaze to the soft carpet. "Which brings me to my own apology."



James was not the cruel, heartless man that many people in town thought he was. However, he still hated having to apologize, and it

left his heart thrumming nervously. Apologies were supposed to come from the heart, but James had this silly, childish fear that he would somehow make a mess of things. Make it all worse.

Agatha and Alicia, both watched him patiently. Kindly. Nobody urged him to hurry or frowned in impatience; it was just pure, patient acceptance.

When he finally *did* manage to speak, he was at least pleased to note that his voice came out even. "What I accused you of was horrid, and I should have known that you would never try to hurt Alicia. Panic clouded by judgement, and in the moment I'm afraid that I would rather have accused you than stop to think who really could have done it."

Agatha frowned, her thin brows knitted. "In your defense, I don't think any of us could have ever suspected Edwin." She ran a hand through blonde curls, frown deepening. "What he did was disgusting, and I don't blame you for thinking of me instead of him."

"That doesn't make it *right*, though," James insisted. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Alicia quietly encouraging him with a gentle smile. His chest warmed, and it spurred him on to continue. "I hurt you, and I'm *so sorry* for that; I understand if you can't forgive me, but I do hope we can be friends again. No more accusing each other of ridiculous things, no more ignoring each other's feelings."

Agatha hesitated for a while, lip caught between her teeth. Her lips parted several times, but each time she paused before actually speaking.

Perhaps it was too much to ask, too soon. He truly didn't want to pressure her into anything she didn't want, and if that meant giving her more time, then he would. The last thing James wanted was to force friendship on someone who didn't want it, even if that someone was his dearest friend.

Yet eventually Agatha met his eyes, and there was a smile on her slender face. "I *have* missed you," she admitted quietly, "and it's been terribly boring with only my mother for company. I'm surprised she didn't come bolting in when she heard you were visiting." Her smile widened, laughter in her voice. "I would love nothing more than to put all of this behind us, and to be your friend again. And Alicia." She

turned her gaze to Alicia. "I would also very much love to consider you a friend. I'm thankful that you're willing to give me that chance."

Alicia's own smile was gentle. Affectionate. When she laughed, it filtered throughout the living room like music. "Of course. I hope we can spend time together; I'd so love to get to know you properly. I don't know what it is that wealthy women do to pass the time, but I'm eager to learn my way around this new life of mine, as a lady."

"I'm sure that Agatha can teach you anything and everything that you need," James said softly, "but you're already doing a fantastic job. All you need is to be yourself because that's the best version of you there is."

His chest fluttered when he saw how Alicia grinned. She looked so radiant, with the fire gently flickering across her face. Somehow, the warmth of the light on her skin made the bright green of her eyes pop, and they almost seemed to *glow*, like something magical and wonderful. It was hypnotizing, how beautiful Alicia looked when she smiled.

"I hope you have many happy years together," Agatha said with a smile, "and I hope that the horridness of what Edwin did to you won't tarnish your happiness too much. You deserve to live a beautiful life; both of you."

James wasn't sure that he could ever forget what Edwin did. He wasn't sure if he could ever entirely forgive, either, even if he was trying to. Edwin had betrayed his trust, killed one of his loved ones and hurt another; that was the kind of thing that stayed for years, that never *ever* truly went away.

Yet he had Jenny, and Samuel, and he had them to help. He had Alicia, of course, who was so loving and understanding that it simply wasn't *possible* to feel upset around her. She always knew exactly what to do. Now he had his best friend back too - all of the people that mattered were by his side, ready to help however they could, and James counted himself lucky to have such wonderful people in his life.

Whatever the future held, James knew that they'd be all right, so long as they were together.

Epilogue

Alicia brushed hair from her eyes, squinting up at the sun that blazed overhead. They were lucky, she thought, for it to be such a beautiful day today. She had spent the last week worrying that it would rain on their big day, or that something would happen to interrupt and ruin it.

It felt strange now, to stand outside of the town's largest church, alone. There was no father to walk her down the aisle, not even a brother or a family friend. There was Rachel, of course; but it was unheard of for another woman to walk a bride down the aisle to her husband. So here she was, admiring the sunshine as she gathered the courage to walk inside, wishing that her family were here.

Except they *were*, she realized after a moment. Samuel and Jenny waited inside. So did Agatha and her mother, who she had come to be close to in the months since they were first introduced. Rachel had been concerned at first when she learned who Alicia was marrying but had come around quickly. James had aunts, uncles and cousins, who although he wasn't close to, were family all the same. Just because neither of them had parents, didn't mean that they didn't have people who loved them.

The sun continued to shine high above her, filtering through beautiful, fluffy clouds. Although she couldn't see herself, Alicia imagined how the sun shone on the pale pink of her wedding dress, how it made her skin glow. The dress itself was simpler than a lady would usually wear, at her own request; but it was still the most beautiful thing she had ever worn. Made of soft pink lace, the bodice had a high waist tied with a thick ribbon, the skirt flowing past her hips and legs to just barely trail the ground. The sleeves were short and puffed, but still slim enough that she didn't feel *too* outrageous. The low, square neckline gave only the barest hint of cleavage, but her slender collarbones stood out against the soft fabric when she moved her arms or neck. Her hair, done in the same style that Nora had once made for her, was laced with white ribbons.

She felt, as rare as it was, beautiful. And now she was going to walk down the aisle and show an entire church full of people how beautiful she was, which suffice to say had her stomach twisting with nerves.

Taking a deep breath, Alicia steadied herself and took the first step into the church.

It wasn't large by any means; there were only five pews on either side, Alicia saw as she strode inside. Even then, the pews weren't full - without Alicia's family in attendance, people had filled mostly the groom's side; but she noticed with a little jolt of happiness that Agatha, Samuel, and Jenny sat right at the front, occupying the bride's side instead. It helped, just a little, to ease her nerves. As Alicia walked past, she offered them a kind smile - only to remember what Agatha had told her about keeping her eyes front, and quickly snapping her head back to the aisle.

Even so, she didn't miss Samuel's little smile, or the way Jenny twisted excitedly in her seat.

The church itself was lovely; arched windows let in plenty of sun, which cast thin golden beams across the pews and guests. The high ceilings made even the slightest noise echo throughout the entire church; but it was a pleasant, soothing sort of sound. Then her eyes fell to the altar, where James and the priest stood, and she felt herself grin.

The priest, an older man named Father Thomas, smiled as she approached. He was a kindly old man, Alicia knew from the brief times they had spoken before, when she first started visiting this church before the wedding. He welcomed her with open arms and a bright, cheerful smile.

"Dearly beloved," he began, gaze shifting to the guests, "we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man, and this woman, in holy matrimony..."

His words caused Alicia to smile, and once she started, she simply couldn't *stop*. It still felt so unreal, to be marrying the man she loved; a part of her still expected something to go wrong. What, she wasn't sure, but she couldn't possibly imagine that the world would let this play out. She didn't deserve such a beautiful wedding, or a perfect

husband like James.

Father Thomas then turned to them both, and Alicia felt herself fidgeting as giddiness welled up in her chest. Even back home, she had never been so lucky as to attend a wedding ceremony before; she knew no young people wishing to marry and had never been lucky enough to know a friend that wanted to marry. She had never dreamed, that her very first wedding would be her *own*.

Father Thomas' smile was kind as he addressed James, as if to try and ease their nerves. "James Arvill, will you have this woman as your wedded wife, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love her, comfort her, honor, and keep her in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto her, so long as you both shall live?"

Alicia had never heard such a speech spoken aloud before, and she turned to James with wide, nervous eyes as she awaited his reply.

And then, she took him in for the first time; he was dressed in a fitted cream shirt and a dark blue waistcoat, and it was embroidered with tiny little flowers across the breast pocket. Silver cufflinks gleamed on his wrist, which he wrung nervously as he offered Alicia a beautiful smile. "I will."

Her heart soared at those two simple words. Finally, the last of her worries melted away as she gazed into his soft blue eyes, and she accepted that yes, this was really happening. There was to be no interruption, no disaster to cut their day short. She could really allow herself to enjoy today, and truly let her happiness take over.

"Alicia May Sempill," Father Thomas said - and hearing her so unused middle name had Alicia jolting to attention, "Will you have this man as your wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Will you love him, comfort him, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as you both shall live?"

Alicia's throat felt dry as she replied, not from fear, but because this was where everything came together. By agreeing, out loud, she was officially announcing James Arvill as her husband. Feeling James' eyes hot on her skin, and announced, "I will."

Alicia had heard about the next part, on those days as a child when Mama recounted her own wedding years ago. The dance of hands was an intricate part of the ceremony, where her hands were passed to James' as a sign of their joining. It was different now, with no father to pass her hands to Father Thomas; but in the end, it worked well enough, and Alicia still felt fit to burst with excitement when her hand was laid in James'. He was soft, warm, and lovely, and it felt so good to be holding his hand.

"Now, after me," Father Thomas spoke - and dutifully, James repeated.

"I, James Arvill, take Alicia May Sempill, to be my wedded wife. To have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance." His voice carried wonderfully through the little church, echoing from the high beamed ceilings, and bouncing off of the tall windows. When he turned to her, his eyes were shining.

Alicia had never seen him look so happy since she had known him, and it warmed her heart to know that *she* was the source of that happiness.

Next, Alicia gently loosened her hand around James', feeling the ache of how tightly she was gripping him, before taking his right hand in hers once more. When the time came to repeat her vows from Father Thomas, she worried that her voice might crack; but no, it carried just as strongly as James' own. "I, Alicia May Sempill, take James Arvill to be my wedded husband. To have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health; to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance." The words slipped from her lips with surprising ease as she gazed up at her husband.

Husband. Alicia didn't think that she would ever tire of thinking of him as such.

Then, James slipped a dainty ring from his waistcoat pocket, and held it out to her. It sparkled in the morning sunshine, beautiful and delicate. She felt lucky enough to have an engagement ring, as it was rare for such a thing to be gifted but seeing this made her heart thunder in her chest.

"It was my mother's," James said quietly, offering her a smile, "you're a part of the family now."

As the ring slid onto her finger, Alicia felt herself trembling. It happened sometimes; a lasting effect of the hemlock poisoning, leaving her muscles weaker than before. Yet James didn't seem to mind as he held her hand steady, and gently slipped the ring onto her finger. It fit perfectly.

When their eyes met, Alicia wanted nothing more than to close the space between them and *kiss*. Yet there were so many eyes on them, including those of Father Thomas, and Alicia's face flushed as if he somehow knew what she was thinking. He didn't, of course, but even *thinking* such a thing in God's presence made her whole face light up in embarrassment.

The ceremony was over, and Alicia found herself wishing it could have continued forever. She and James signed the marriage register, which was of course necessary but hardly entertaining. Of course, they needed physical proof of their union, and if it helped to draw out the ceremony even just a minute longer, she was grateful for it.

Then James took her hand in his, and together they strode down the aisle together. She felt Jenny and Samuel staring after them, heard the delighted murmurs of friends and family surrounding them, but she had eyes only for James. He looked so *handsome*, with his hair slicked back, a few unruly strands still cast across his forehead. His shirt fit just right, showing off his broad shoulders and long arms, and the flowers on the waistcoat was a lovely touch. Upon closer inspection, they were tiny roses. She wondered, idly, if he had requested them specifically.

Outside, the sunshine hit her fully; it was warm, golden, and *perfect*, casting a glow across her face. A light breeze took away the worst of the heat and left the air pleasantly warm.

"I can't believe we're really married," James murmured as they descended the steps. There were people watching; curious strangers, or perhaps acquaintances of James, smiling and waving as they left the church. James offered a small inclination of his head and a warm smile in return.

"Neither can I," Alicia admitted, and her heart fluttered against her

ribs. "But I'm so happy, James. After everything we've been through, doesn't this feel so magical?"

He smiled, squeezing her hand as he pulled Alicia close to his side. "It is magical," he agreed, "and I hope that the magic never wears off."

Alicia didn't think that it *could*, not around James. He was like something mythical; strange, wonderful, and perfect. Without thinking, she reached up to press a kiss to the corner of his lips, not caring who saw.

In response, James pulled her even closer and smiled. "I can't wait to spend my life with you."

In that moment, Alicia felt like the luckiest woman alive.

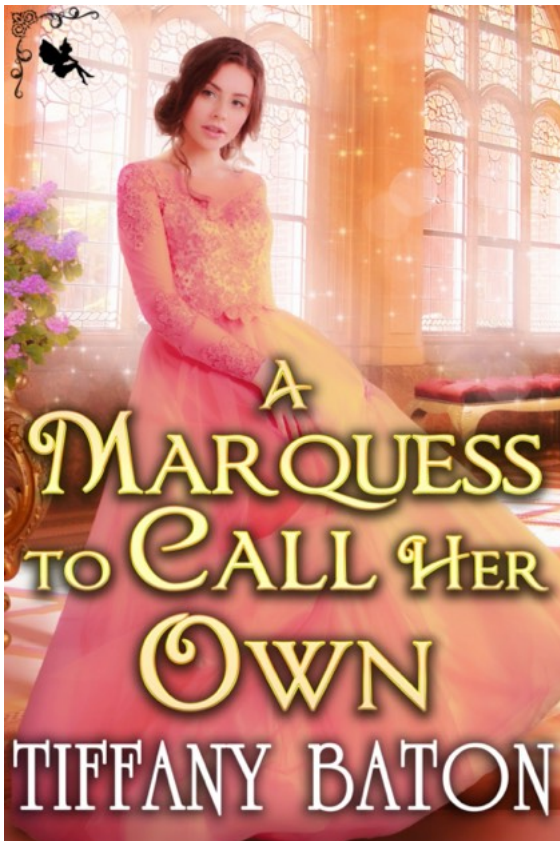
The End?

Extended Epilogue

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Preview: A Marquess to Have and to Loathe

Prologue

Dinner parties at Avenshire House in London were always a splendid affair.

There were always at least twenty courses served in the dining room for their inimitable guests. Additional candles added bright lighting and the most glorious aromas wafted through the air.

All twelve guests were dressed in their finest clothes for the evening's festivities. At the head of the table sat the host, Carolyn McKinnon, the Duchess of Hobton, who resided here every summer with her family. Beside her was her husband, Emmanuel, talking fastidiously with their son.

It was all fine and well, but Evalyn McKinnon—their only daughter and the second child—was utterly bored.

How many dinner parties do we really need to host, let alone attend, in one Season? I swear each year, we tack a few more on. How I wish Mother hadn't insisted I come out so young. I'm only nineteen, and these occasions already make me feel like an old maid.

They were on the twelfth course and already she had eaten far too much. Evalyn found herself taking only two small bites no matter how delicious the food might be.

And I've already accidentally dipped my hair in two of the soups.

She tugged at her long, dark blonde hair in frustration. Just as she was considering coming up with an excuse to free her from this dull affair, her brother stood and tapped his glass. For whatever reason, Christopher had decided it was time to give a toast.

"Good evening," he announced cheerfully. He was considered handsome by almost everyone in London. Evalyn had endured three Seasons of hearing the other young women gush over his dark curly hair and *sparkling* hazel eyes. He was tall and thin and was well-known for his fencing abilities.

If only he wasn't so annoying.

Evalyn picked up her glass and took a small sip of the sherry. Her parents said that she would get used to the taste, but she wasn't sure that she wanted to.

"I may not be the host, so please accept my apologies for speaking without permission," Christopher jested.

There was some light laughter around the table, mainly from Janette Roland. Miss Roland was the daughter of the famed Earl de Rubenser, said to be nearly as rich as the royal family. The money and her looks made up for the lower title. Her hair was a light brown, almost blonde, and curled perfectly in the latest style. She had pale green eyes with a slight build and delicate hands.

"But I would like to make an announcement. This is very dear to my heart as I am surrounded by my loved ones," Christopher continued. "Friends and family, I thank you for your attendance here this evening. You've made it the perfect occasion to share my good news."

Is he ever actually going to share it?

Evalyn fumbled with her glass upon realizing she hardly had a sip left. Glancing over her shoulder, she looked to a servant to refill it.

"Bravo," called a teasing voice from across the table. "We would love to share it with you if you can expound upon it with us sometime this evening."

This encompassed laughter around the table, even from Christopher.

But Evalyn looked over with a glare, hardly able to believe someone would be so rude as to interrupt a toast.

Seated across from her was Janette's cousin, the bane of Evalyn's existence, Duncan Flemming. His mother had passed away when he was young, so he had spent much of his childhood with Janette's family, who owned an estate near Evalyn's family's country home.

The four of them had grown up meeting on countless occasions through their childhood and now into the London Seasons. Even after Duncan's father moved him away once he remarried, Duncan showed up everywhere.

It would make sense if he were friends with Janette, but they seem more like strangers these days. They are six years apart, similar to my five from Christopher. But no, everyone gathers around for my charming brother's attention.

Evalyn wished Christopher wasn't there. Then her life would be so

much easier.

He noticed her looking and turned to her with a wink.

It only infuriated her more. Duncan Flemming, the future Marquess of Galeran, had to be one of the most annoying people she had ever known.

And what makes it worse is that he has always been in my life.

Evalyn stared him down, and he eagerly took the challenge. A smirk spread across his face as he relaxed his shoulders to stare right back at her. Neither of them blinked.

“Thank you, Duncan,” Christopher said with a chuckle. “I appreciate your candor as always. He does make a good point, so I will just come out and say it. This morning, I asked the beautiful Miss Janette to make the rest of my days happy. She accepted. And so, we are to be married!”

Wait, what did he just say?

Jerking in surprise, Evalyn turned to her brother. Everyone had started to clap and cheer at the good news.

In the excitement, no one paid much mind to Duncan slapping the table and pointing at Evalyn. “Ha!”

She waved him off with an irritable scowl before standing with everyone else.

“Wonderful news!” cried the Rolands. “Wonderful!”

How is Mother already in tears?

Her heart thudded in her chest as she looked around the table to see everyone clapping. Mixed emotions felt jumbled inside her stomach, making her uneasy. Her brother was getting married.

She grudgingly joined in with the clapping and even forced a smile on her face. Weddings and marriage were something she had been trying so hard to keep off her mind while in London. And now, it seemed it would be impossible moving forward.

“This is perfect!” her mother cried out jovially before putting a hand on her husband. The short, curvy woman, wearing earrings much too big for her face, beamed. “We must have the wedding at our manor. It will make the perfect autumn!”

That was when Evalyn stopped clapping.

She slumped back into her seat while trying to comprehend what would happen next. The one place she thought was safe, Hobton Estate Manor in Wintersel, was about to be overrun with people and festivities. Usually, the off-season was safe for her to enjoy time by herself with no one bothering her.

And now?

What sort of mess are we all getting ourselves into?

Chapter One

Looking out her tall window, Evalyn found herself relieved to finally be leaving London.

It was a beautiful city. However, it was too crowded and too smelly and too boring for her tastes. She heard of so many exciting opportunities around town and yet none of them were meant for her.

This Season especially had been beyond disappointing.

Why don't they have a fencing club for women? It makes little sense why it should only be for men. Christopher's teacher back in Wintersel would teach me.

If only Geoffrey hadn't retired five years ago. I'm sure he could have convinced someone here in town to be my teacher.

"Miss Evalyn?"

She quickly turned from the window with a guilty look before sighing in relief upon finding her lady's maid there.

Betsy Tanner was a young woman in her mid-twenties with rather plain looks but a kindly spirit. She took her role very seriously which tended to bore Evalyn, but the maid was loyal and kept her secrets which she was grateful for. Gossiping servants only ever wanted to talk and talk. But Betsy was intelligent, quiet, and incredibly helpful.

"Betsy—" Evalyn sighed in relief— "I thought you were Mother. She's not coming this way, is she?"

"No, my lady," her maid assured her.

Both of them glanced around the room. It was very messy. There were clothes strewn all over the place along, with hats and other garments.

Since Betsy's family lived in London, Evalyn always tried to give her maid extra time off to be with those she loved. She wanted to make sure that Betsy had a chance to say farewell to her family before they left this afternoon for her family's estate in Wintersel.

They had argued that morning about how all of her things should be packed, and Evalyn had promised to help and do it herself.

Oh bother.

"Betsy," Evalyn said as she felt her face pale. "I am sorry! I meant to... I was going to do it, I swear. I can do it now. All I did was make a mess, didn't I? Oh dear. Let me see what I can do."

She hurriedly ran around her room, collecting the hats her mother insisted that she wear. It was usually to detract from Evalyn's hair that refused to stay in place. Only for the fanciest of events did they put handfuls of gel in her hair to keep it stiff.

Picking up the last hat, Betsy shook her head with a chuckle. "Don't worry, my lady. I've already talked to Caroline and Rachel in the kitchen to see if they could spare a few minutes of their time to help me up here. I had a feeling this might happen."

Evalyn straightened up and sighed. She offered a sheepish smile as her maid took the hats from her. "You know me too well. Thank you, my dear."

"Anything for you," Betsy assured her. "Your mother asked about the packing situation upon my arrival, and I swore the kitchen to secrecy, of course. She thinks we're nearly finished. And she won't come up here because she's trying to get a footman to run into town to get her some herbs for the ride."

She can answer my questions before I have even asked them. If Mother came up here right now, I'd be in so much trouble.

"You are the best maid a girl could ask for," Evalyn told her. She went over to her vanity and grabbed her favorite hairbrush. Made simply with a red oak handle, but it massaged her scalp instead of feeling like fingernails clawing at her.

"You treat me well for it," Betsy said.

Hearing a knock at the door, both women turned around. Evalyn watched her maid go over and open the door just a crack before opening it all the way. Caroline and Rachel, maids they hired for their London home every year, stepped through quietly.

Rachel was at least twice the age of the rest of them but moved spritely as she started piling up boxes in a uniform manner. Caroline had something in her hands, a small platter, that she brought over to Evalyn.

"You have a letter, my lady," the young maid said. She was Rachel's granddaughter, and though she only moved at half the speed of Rachel, her work was still good enough.

"A letter?" Evalyn asked dumbly.

Her eyes flitted from Betsy down to the folded piece of paper on the small platter. Frowning, she picked it up and eyed her name on the page warily.

Who would be writing to me in London? I'm practically out the door. Surely everyone knows our family is leaving the ton for the Season. All invitations typically go through Mother... so, what is this?

"Betsy?" Evalyn asked. She eyed the script thoughtfully. It was fancy and done in dark blue ink instead of the typical black. But she couldn't decide if she had ever seen the script before, only confusing her further.

Her maid was already starting over.

Betsy licked her lips before picking up the letter from Evalyn. Caroline turned back to start helping her grandmother with the clothes and trunks. This gave Evalyn and her maid a little privacy near the window.

"It is to you and you only?" Betsy raised an eyebrow. "And no return address. Could this be an admirer, my lady?"

"Definitely not," Evalyn said.

She was only nineteen years old, wasn't she? There were still years for her to start considering men and babies. Evalyn shuddered at the thought. For the last three years, her brother and his friends had incessantly teased her about this, which only made her hate the idea more.

I suppose I should have more friends than Elizabeth Thorn. She's still traipsing about Europe with her new husband, and none of that makes sense to me.

That reminds me, I owe her a letter.

"All right, read it," Evalyn said with a sigh. "Let's get it over with."

Betsy nodded, opening the letter carefully, scanned it, and then raised her eyebrows. Such a reaction made Evalyn nervous. She pulled on her fingertips, a silly habit from childhood, waiting for something to happen.

“Well?” she asked.

“It is short and polite. Let’s see. *“To Miss Evalyn McKinnon, I must beg your apology if you find my letter too forward. Knowing that you will be leaving London today, I could not let you go without sending my regards. It was a pleasure to dance with you at Miss Blaisington’s ball last month. Perhaps the next time you return to town, we can dance once more. I wish you the best, Elmore Stoker.”* Well, that is quite nice.”

Elmore Stoker was the Earl of Robarton. The name was familiar though his face was less so.

All Evalyn really remembered about the Blaisington ball was stepping on a few toes and feeding the peacocks outdoors. But she had danced with a few gentlemen, including Lord Robarton.

If she remembered correctly, she had danced with him on a few other occasions as well.

Perhaps I should have listened to Mother more about paying closer attention. The only problem is that there are too many rules to follow.

Evalyn hesitated. “Is it? It seems innocent enough, I think. That was a kind note and surely means nothing more.” But she saw the maid pause and knew she had to be missing something. “What? Tell me, Betsy.”

Her maid glanced over the letter one more time before offering it to Evalyn to review for herself. “It is a nice letter, Evalyn. I do believe he is hinting that he wishes to meet with you again. He might even be expecting a response from you.”

That’s practically a courtship, then, isn’t it?

“What?” Evalyn snatched up the letter and squinted at the words. “No, he never said that. Oh bother. Mother is always telling me about these clues that men give, and yet I can never remember. I’m not sure that I... No. Here, put it away, Betsy.”

“Away?”

“Anywhere you like.” She took a step back. “I would rather focus on our travels now rather than on a letter I’m not prepared to respond to. Speaking of, can you remind me when we arrive at our estate to prepare a letter to Elizabeth?”

The maid fumbled with the paper as she nodded. “Yes, my lady. Whatever you like. I’ll tuck it away in case you want to read it again. But mind you, if this lord is writing to you, there is a fair chance that

he may also be writing to your parents.”

He wouldn't. Would he?

Most courtships she heard of started a little differently than through polite letters. And it wasn't like she had even agreed to one yet. Vaguely recalling Elmore Stoker, Evalyn knew he wasn't hideous but had appeared slightly dull.

Evalyn made a weird face before looking back out of her window. That was the only aspect of being in town that she enjoyed.

It was a little adventure being able to watch so many people walk along nearby Bond Street. They often had ridiculous clothes. Many would ride their horses, but few could do that well. Watching people like this could often give her a good laugh.

This made her wonder if she was about to start missing London. That had never happened before.

She had been coming with her family for the Season ever since she was ten years old. The last day here was always the best. They were returning to Wintersel, where they had more land and horses with less stress and responsibilities.

Not that she had a lot of those.

She was the second child of a duke and a daughter, nonetheless. No one typically minded much of what she did. It was only in the last couple of years that her mother realized that she wasn't fit for society, and that had been a heyday for all.

But they were leaving, which meant Evalyn could be herself again. She felt the hope flutter in her chest.

Her thoughts wandered as she considered her two homes and what would happen when she made it back to the place she loved so dearly. All she wanted to do was be back at home where she could be herself with no pressure from her parents to be anyone else.

She was in the middle of plotting a future picnic by the lake when she remembered that she would not be alone.

Well, dash it all to pieces. How do I keep forgetting? My brother is getting married. Thus what little peace I had hoped to enjoy at our manor will be ruined.

Not only would Christopher be back with the family, since he had not spent time at Wintersel in years, but he would be bringing a parade of people with them. The town would be overrun with their guests.

Evalyn nearly gagged at the thought. This would not be the cheerful return home that she had been looking forward to.

Though she hardly recalled Elmore Stoker, Evalyn couldn't help but think that anyone would be better than Duncan Flemming.

A tight feeling settled in her stomach. Something was going to happen this summer, and she wasn't quite sure what it would be. She was only determined to detest every minute with Duncan.

Chapter Two

Arriving home, Duncan climbed the stairs two at a time before reaching his room.

He fidgeted with his jacket before his valet, Timothy Richardson, reached him to help him undress. His clothes were damp from his exercise that day at the club.

Once again, he was the reigning champion of fencing. Christopher had wanted a third game in an attempt to win before they left London. But alas, his friend had yet to beat him.

“You can keep trying”— Duncan had promised his friend with a chuckle— *“But until you fix that stance of yours, I don’t think you’re going to get anywhere.”*

Now, they were out of time for fencing. He considered if there might be a way for them to continue their exercises in Wintersel. That had been where Christopher had learned his skill, was it not? They could bring their own sabers and even practice outside under the nice weather.

I’m sure we could come up with some remedy for this. Christopher has assured me there is plenty of room for my morning rides. But I cannot be seen growing oafish and slow.

“Thank you, Timothy,” Duncan said to his valet as he pulled a new shirt over his head. “Now, how is the packing coming along? I don’t see my hat boxes.”

Timothy was a good ten years older with thick spectacles, bright red hair, and always wore a sober expression.

“They have been packed, my lord, just as you requested this morning. Additional padding and lavender.”

Grinning, Duncan nodded. He waved off his valet to finish buttoning his cuffs on his own. That way, he could walk around the room to inspect the current stage of progress.

"It's coming along well, Timothy. This is perfect," he said to his valet. "For my handkerchiefs, make sure you're double bagging them in silk, will you?"

He had learned both the need and the passion for dressing well over the last couple of years, especially during his stint in Oxford. The memories made him grin. There had been good friends and good times practically every day. Without them, he would only look half as handsome as possible.

And what a shame that would be.

Duncan took his time inspecting the half-filled trunks. His stepmother and father had suggested that he only bring half of his wardrobe. But that was out of the question. That would be like deciding not to wear shoes to a ball; it was a nonsensical idea.

This trip to the Hobton Estate Manor would be a memorable adventure with Christopher's wedding taking place in a few short months. Apparently, it was an old tradition of Janette's family to make it a festive occasion.

While he thought it was a waste of time, he hadn't exactly had any other pressing matters.

If I am going to be in the middle of nowhere again, I am doing it while looking my best.

A wedding would be a grand affair. Christopher and Janette had insisted that he accompany them to the estate during wedding preparations; Duncan supposed they might have a fine time of the occasion. They could enjoy the countryside for a while before bringing the spirit of the city into the home.

Though his father and stepmother owned their own out-of-town home near Cornwall, Duncan hadn't been there since starting at university. All of his school breaks had led him to either travel about or straight here to London.

Where else was a young man meant to go?

His father wanted him to come home to learn how to tend to their property and prepare to become the marquess in his own right. But Duncan didn't want that, at least not yet.

There's so much more that I could be doing right now with my life. Why would I want to settle down while I'm in my prime?

Leaning forward to reach into the trunks, Duncan paused to straighten

out the wrinkles that were threatening to form on his favorite violet vest.

That could not happen - they were difficult to brush out, and he didn't like having to wait for Timothy to help him.

"Timothy?" he asked as he straightened up.

His valet came over to his side and looked into the trunk. "Ah. I see, my lord. Would you like me to iron these once more before I lock it shut?"

I suppose that is an option. But if I have him iron the clothing in this trunk, I might as well have him iron everything else. And we haven't the time for that.

"No, I suppose it will have to wait," Duncan responded reluctantly. "That can be done upon our arrival as per usual. However, once we return to town, we're purchasing new trunks to avoid this problem. I'm tired of seeing wrinkles in my clothing."

"Of course," Timothy said with a nod. "First thing upon our return. Is there anything else that I can do to be of service, my lord, as I pack?"

Shaking his head, Duncan knew that if he stayed any longer that he would spot more irregularities. The very thought made his skin itch. He shrugged and then sighed.

"You know what to do. I wouldn't trust anyone else to tend to my clothing, Timothy. Clear out the wrinkles the best you can and make sure everything remains color coordinated. I trust you for the most part," he added. "And hurry. I have supper, and then we must be on the road."

Leaving the room, Duncan tried to think about anything other than seeing even a handkerchief out of place. He told himself that it wouldn't happen. Everything would be proper for his journey out to the Hobton Estate Manor.

A grin came to his face as he thought of the fun they would have. Christopher was always good company. Janette whined, but she was decent. As for Evalyn, well, he was certain there would be countless opportunities to make fun of her.

Like that yellow dress she wore to that ball just a few months ago. Who thought to put her in yellow? What made it worse was how dirty it got on one of her walks around the garden.

She claimed it was some sort of bird. I had joked for days about that.

It had been a while since he had been to her family's manor. He wasn't thrilled about celebrating a marriage he hardly cared about, but he would be comfortable enough. There would be enough festivities and enough property to enjoy outside of crowded London.

At the top of the stairs, however, Duncan frowned as he remembered one particular summer spent at the Hobton Estate Manor.

"See? I told you I could climb the tree," Evalyn cried out as she jumped from the shortest branch onto the ground. Throwing her arms up in the air, she smirked over at them.

Duncan exchanged a look with Christopher. They had dared her to climb the tree in the hopes of making her disappear for a short while. They were twelve years old now, practically men. And there she was, a scrawny seven-year-old who wouldn't leave them alone.

"Yeah, but that was because it was a baby tree," Duncan told her.

He eyed the sticks in her hair and wondered how much trouble she might get in with her governess for that. If they were lucky, it would be a lot.

"It was a big tree!" Evalyn stomped her foot. "You couldn't do it!"

Christopher laughed and shook his head. "Yes, I could! We both could, you goose. I climbed that tree last week, remember? I climbed all the trees near the house."

Still pouting since they wouldn't give her a victory, Evalyn glanced between them before settling her gaze on Duncan. When she smiled, he jutted out his chin stubbornly so she would know she couldn't get to him.

"But Duncan didn't," she cried out. "Duncan can't climb trees!"

"I can, too!" He crossed his arms and stared her down in frustration, unable to believe that anyone would think he was such a child. He could do anything he wanted to. As the future marquess, it was his right to climb a tree if he so desired.

"No, you can't!"

He growled, stepping over to her. "I can, too!"

"Cannot," she said and then stuck out her tongue.

Behind him, Christopher started laughing. It was hard to tell just what he was laughing at, but it annoyed Duncan. Both of them were irritating him, and he knew how, to prove that he was right.

"I can, too," he announced to Evalyn. "Now I'm going to show you!"

He took a step toward the tree, but she was there to shake her head. "Nuh, Duncan. You said this was a baby tree, and you keep bragging that you're not a baby. So you need a tree that isn't a baby. Climb that tree!"

Following her pointed finger, Duncan spotted the nearby apple tree. He had jumped up to collect apples just the other day. There was one branch just low enough for him to grab onto. It was bigger than the tree Evalyn had climbed by at least a few feet.

Which meant he would have bragging rights and could make her be quiet.

"Fine, I will!" he announced proudly before hurrying over.

That entire event had not gone well. There had been poison ivy near the base of Evalyn's tree, putting her in bed for two weeks after this.

As for himself, Duncan vaguely recalled missing a branch. He could no longer tell if it had been on his way up or on his way down. The important thing was that he had ended up breaking his arm.

His summer after that had been a blur before going to his father's estate with his tutor's return.

On the bright side, he had clearly won the tree-climbing competition, and that was all that mattered.

"Duncan? There you are, boy." His father stood at the base of the stairs. The older man stood tall and thin with graying hair. "Join us for supper, and then we'll be on our way."

His father, David Flemming, had never been overly kind or in any way fatherly while Duncan was growing up. The man had practically disappeared from Duncan's life when he was only three years old because his mother passed away.

When they saw each other again, his father was bringing home a new bride. It had been a polite but not a close relationship since then.

"Good evening," Duncan said cordially as he sat across from his stepmother.

"Duncan, how good to see you," cooed Margaret. Not yet forty years of age, the redhead came straight from Scottish royalty. She still had a slight twang of that highland accent, and she had staring eyes that usually focused on finding something new to gossip over. "I'm so glad you could join us. Will you be sad to leave London? I know you love it so."

He shrugged as their first dish was brought out. "I do, but it shall be here when I return. I think I will look into spending the holidays back

here.”

His father frowned, glancing up. “I thought you said that you would come back with us to Wilcheshire this year?”

“No, I said that I would think about it,” Duncan corrected him. “And I did. I decided I would rather be here.”

Glancing between them, Margaret furrowed her brow in concern. She was always trying to smooth out the tension between them as though that would help. If anything, she typically made it worse.

“Let him stay,” she told his father. “Who knows? Perhaps he is staying here for a young lady. I know a few families are remaining behind as well.”

Duncan snorted into his soup. “Not any worth my time.”

“That discounts the young Duchess of Minehart,” he heard his father murmur to his stepmother.

The woman nodded thoughtfully. “Then what about Miss Evalyn? I always thought that would be a perfect match. You two know the family so well. Surely, she is being considered?”

Duncan couldn’t help but laugh at such an absurd notion.

Evalyn and I? She’s nothing but trouble, that girl.

Not only is she childish and petty, but she’s always making veiled threats and remarks at me when no one is looking. I have no choice but to defend myself, of course. She never misses a chance to get under my skin. I think we would strangle each other on our wedding night if such a tragedy ever took place!

“That’s preposterous,” Duncan told his parents confidently. “There are matches made in heaven, and those that are not. And Evalyn, I can assure you, is far from an angel.”

His father paused from looking at the second course with lamb and parsley. “What? Duncan, that’s not very nice to say.”

“Only because you don’t know her as I do,” Duncan reminded the man. Lifting his fork and knife, he dug right into the savory meal. It was tender and juicy, reminding him that he would have the chance to go hunting while out in the country.

He was a good mark and would love a chance to catch himself a deer. Just the idea made him grin.

Not only would he have a chance to go hunting, but he could also find plenty of opportunities to mock Evalyn McKinnon. This trip could be fun after all. Already he could hardly wait to get started.

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

<https://amzn.to/3whF8aG>

Thank you very much!

Also by Tiffany Baton

Thank you for reading ***A Marquess to Call Her Own!***

I truly hope you enjoyed reading it as much as I enjoyed writing it!! ♥ If you did, may I ask you to **please write a review HERE?** It would mean the world to me.

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A Marquess to Have and to Loathe

All a Lady Never Wanted

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How to Love a Beastly Duke

The Dukedom of Secrets Past

The Fearless Governess Affair

Your support is what allows me to keep doing what I love most, and I'm forever grateful!

Tiffany Baton

About the Author

Like all true romantics, Tiffany had always been fascinated by the great love stories of the past. The only child of two historians, she had always felt a pull towards British History and the epics that it spawned. But, instead of following in her parent's footsteps, Tiffany chose to express her love of history in her own way: by writing about her favorite era.

After obtaining a degree in English Literature, Tiffany decided to write her first book and never looked back. When she isn't writing, she enjoys spending time with her own Prince Charming, and their two beautiful children, enjoying Massachusetts' natural wonders.

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